

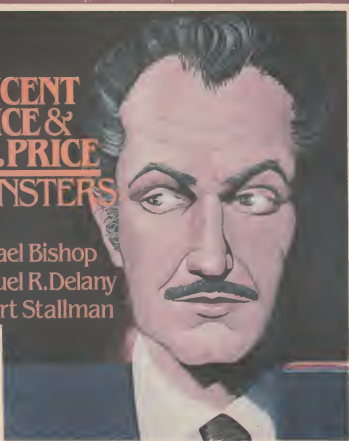
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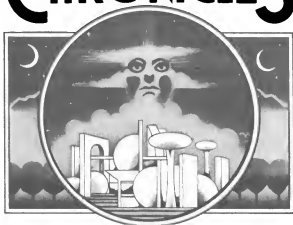
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After scaring us for many years in such movies as *House of Wax*, and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, the well-known actor and his son here investigate What is Scary and Why.

## NEVERYONA by Samuel R. Delany 38



The author published his first novel, *The Jewels of Apor*, in 1962. Since then he has been delighting and surprising readers with his unique mix of erudition and entertainment. Those unfamiliar with his work have a treat in store.

## THE BOOK OF THE BEAST by Robert Stallman 92



The previous two books in this series, *The Orphan* and *The Captive* were published to immense critical and public acclaim. This, the final book in the trilogy, upholds the late author's reputation for fine prose and fantastic adventure.

## NO ENEMY BUT TIME by Michael Bishop 120



The author lives in Pine Mountain, Georgia, where he has been slowly but steadily turning out finely crafted works of fiction for the past 12 years. His most recent offering is a collection of short stories from Arkham House, *Blooded on Arachne*.

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SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST is published six times a year by Davis Publications, Inc. at \$1.95 a copy. Annual subscription of six issues \$11.70 in U.S.A. and possessions; \$13.45 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. currency. Editorial and executive offices, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1938, Marion, Ohio 43305. Allow six to eight weeks for change of address. Application to mail at second class postage rates is pending at New York, NY and at additional mailing office. SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST is the trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1982 by Davis Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection served under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ISBN: 0277-0768 Volume I, No. 3

# EDITORIAL

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By Shawna McCarthy

□ Well, I've tried three times to avoid starting this editorial with a cliché, but it seems to be impossible. Therefore, I shall get right to it: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."

That wasn't too bad, was it? The reason I'm digging up this trite but true quote is to illustrate a question which has come up lately. The question is: "If your magazine is called *Science Fiction Digest*, why do you have all this stuff that's *not* science fiction in it?"

Now, it seems to me that there are several methods of dealing with this question. One is to punch the questioner in the nose and say, "None of your business, smart aleck." This is not good for business, though, and is also dangerous to one's health.

Another method—the best method, I guess—is to deal with the question itself. First of all, the magazine is called *Science Fiction Digest*. And it does contain material which some might say is not science fiction. So one alternative is to retile the book *The Digest of Science Fiction, Fantasy, Science Fact, Essays, Speculative Fact, Horror, or Whatever Else The Editor Happens to Like*. This, I think you'll agree, is somewhat unwieldy and would not look good on a cover.

Our other alternative is to investigate just what we mean by "science fiction." (And as soon as we're done with this, we'll move on to the Unified Field Theory.) Since this is by its nature a one-way conversation, I'll tell you what *I* mean by science fiction. To me, a work of SF need not contain a single spacesuit, robot, alien, proton blaster, or hyperdrive. What it must contain is a single element of the fantastic, without which the story would not stand up. For instance, remember the movie *Earthquake*? At the time, I knew people who considered that to be science fiction, simply because there never had been such an earthquake! I disagreed with them, pointing out that earthquakes were all-too-common everyday occurrences, and thus there was no element of the fantastic in it. On the other hand, consider *Outland*. This too was considered a science fiction film, simply because it took place on Io. However, since the movie would have worked just as well in Virginia City in 1888 (indeed, the producers referred to it as "*High Noon* in

space"), I didn't feel it was SF, despite the plethora of spacesuits and futuristic locales. The element of the fantastic was not essential.

Thus, in *Science Fiction Digest* you'll find a wide range of fiction. The element of the fantastic can be a time machine, a spaceship, a powerful amulet, or an exotic imaginary setting. I frankly don't see any point in the continued debate over What is Science Fiction and What is Fantasy. The line between the two has become sufficiently blurred over the past 50 years to make it a moot point.

What's the difference, really? Either you like a story or you don't. Does it matter if the main character is a magician rather than a laser-brandishing rocket jockey?

In this issue, for instance, you'll find essays on monsters by Vincent Price and his son; a visit to the wilds of prehistoric Africa; an adventure in exotic culture, complete with barbarians and swordfights; and a look at a relationship between a human and a creature that's not quite (or is it?) human. Under the old, strict rules, only one of these stories could be considered *science fiction*, and that's Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time*, simply because it contains a time machine. So I say, let's throw out the old rules! Let's dissolve our borders, get rid of the restrictions which prescribe what we should and should not accept. Let's raise our banners high and march proudly out where no man has gone before. . . . Sorry, I got a bit carried away. The point I'm trying to make is that science fiction is by its nature an expansive medium. It's meant to broaden horizons, not narrow them. If you restrict your reading to certain types of books with certain types of heroes (and heroines), weapons, transportation, and clothing, you'll be cheating yourself out of a lot of good reading.

This is not to say that each reader shouldn't have individual tastes and preferences. For instance, in quite a few of the responses to our questionnaire, readers have indicated a desire to read "hard" SF, the kind where (for instance) the boiling point of ammonia plays an integral part in the story. And I promise, when I find "hard" SF books that are also well written, I will buy them for this magazine.

What it comes down to is that what I buy for this magazine is what I like and what, from years of being a reader rather than an editor, I think you readers will like. I do have rather varied tastes: Fantasy, "hard" SF, dragons, monsters, ghosts, werewolves, whatever . . . if it's well written and a good story, I'll buy it for you.

Well, that's it for this issue. I hope you enjoy the reading that lies ahead, and I hope to continue providing you with the best in—science fiction. ■

# "If you are seriously interested in science fiction, this is a 'must have' book." — Gene Roddenberry

Sci-fi fans: If you were to buy only one book on your hobby, this is the one. It's definitive — the one reference a buff must have. From A to Z — from *Abbott & Costello Go to Mars* to *Zorlar: The Thing from Venus* — here are over 1,000 detailed entries on the best (and worst) in SF movies, TV, authors, publications, organizations and awards.

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# SPECULATIONS

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By J.W. Silbersack

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*Editor's Note: The astute reader will recognize that one of the books Mr. Silbersack waxes enthusiastic about in this column is also one of the books that appears in this issue. This is purely coincidental and means only that each of us, independently, liked this book very, very much. —Shawna McCarthy*

---

I've resolved to devote this month's column to the more cheerful side of science fiction publishing. I was spurred to my resolve by a handful of novels that individually attest to their authors' extreme competence and collectively display the almost infinite adaptability of the genre, arguably its greatest strength.

Of course, no one I know of has ever reached a very satisfactory definition of science fiction or fantasy and that fact alone probably goes far to provide editorial elbow-room. And for an author, well, it's no-holds-barred. Almost any sort of novel can qualify, and believe me, the science fiction business offers several distinct advantages. For one thing this is the only game in town that consistently and often gives the first novelist a break. A young author would probably do better earning his keep on an assembly line, but getting into print for pennies is a great improvement over not getting into print at all.

I was struck forcibly by a letter I chanced across in the SF newsmagazine *Locus* (Box 3938, San Francisco, CA 94119) in which Marion Zimmer Bradley described a curious "leapfrog" literary effect I had never considered. She wrote, "Most of us are writing in this genre because we like it, and everyone who writes a "mainstream" fantasy has to trade down a little and rehash concepts which have been taken for granted within the field, catering to popular taste instead of writing for a highly knowledgeable audience."

I'm wondering if this ready-made, expert audience doesn't go a long way toward explaining the tremendous vitality of the genre, and not for the obvious reasons either. By presuming literate, committed readers, are SF writers a step ahead of fellow



literateurs? It takes a great burden of explanation off the writer's shoulders and presumably enables him to forge ahead where his fellows have never gone before. Sometimes I'm surprised at the ease with which I can accept a spaceship or time travel in the working mechanism of plot. Familiarity with the conventions of SF seems to have bred in me a greater than average credulity. I suppose this principle extends to experimentalism in style and theme as well. The poor mainstream writer, writing for an ill-defined and uncertainly educated audience, could never muster such willing suspension of disbelief. Realism and SF part company and both sides lose a little by the separation.

Fortunately, a reconciliation seems to be in the works. Over the last few years I've noticed a growing number of SF novels that require little or no shutdown of the intellectual faculties. A new subgenre of realistic SF seems to be a-borning and appropriately **Michael Bishop's** *NO ENEMY BUT TIME*, a novel very much concerned with the birthing of the human race, is in the thick of it.

Until now, Bishop's novels have done little to identify him prominently in the marketplace. His work has been honored with critical fireworks on several occasions—only to further consolidate a small group of Bishop admirers. Novels such as *STOLEN FACES*, *TRANSFIGURATIONS*, and *CATACOMB YEARS* have earned him readers, but he's certainly not as well known as his partisans would wish. *NO ENEMY BUT TIME* may change all that.

A very different sort of subject matter constitutes **John Sladek's** *RODERICK*, Volume 1. Sladek's wry, perceptive wit in this story of a fledgling robot and the higher reaches of academia deserves hyperbole. British reviewers have compared Sladek to *Rabelais* and *Tobias Smollett*; I favor a cross between **S.J. Perelman** and **Edward Albee** as a descriptive mating. In any case Sladek is no slacker—take a look at his recent short story collection, *THE BEST OF JOHN SLADEK*.

A number of welcome reprints are scheduled for the later half of the spring. I'm particularly pleased to see **Keith Roberts's** *PAVANE* back in print from Ace. Roberts's alternate-history novel was an instant classic when it was first published and copies of its first American edition, torn and dog-eared, have been hoarded by many ever since . . . That goes as well for the late **James Schmitz's** trilogy of tales about girl psi Telzey Amberdon. *THE TELZEY TOY*, *THE UNIVERSE AGAINST HER*,

and **THE LION GAME** are all due to be reissued in May and June . . . TOR Books, courtesy of Jim Baen Presents, are planning a number of specially augmented reissues including **STATIONS OF THE NIGHTMARE** by **Philip José Farmer** as I reported in the last issue. What I didn't report was that the volume will contain "Osiris on Crutches" by Farmer and Leo Queequeg Tincrowder, in a remarkable dual performance of author and character.

Delicious humor marks **Phyllis Gotlieb's** **EMPEROR, SWORDS, PENTACLES**. Gotlieb is the author of **SUNBURST, O MASTER CALIBAN**, and a number of highly acclaimed books of poetry, sadly rare south of the Canadian border. **EMPEROR** continues the adventures of the big red cats from Ungrokh (earlier unrelated episodes appeared as **A JUDGEMENT OF DRAGONS**) in a rollicking SF maelstrom of improbable aliens, world-spanning bureaucracies, psionic intrigue, and a lot of good plain fun, all delivered in Gotlieb's highly literate and entertaining prose.



Wayne D. Barlowe



Frederic Marvin



Charles Mikaloycak

Berkley Books is announcing its new trade paperback line this month and has posted five books of interest here. **Frank Herbert** devotees will be glad to learn that all four books in the **DUNE** cycle are being issued larger than life with new covers at nicely affordable prices. Those have been waiting for **Stephen King's** highly personal history of the horror genre, **DANSEMACABRE**, to go into paperback will be glad to have this reference tool in a sturdy trade edition . . . Macmillan is bringing out **THE SELKIE**, a first and very unusual effort in the horror genre by

two science fiction writers, **Charles Sheffield** and **David Bischoff** . . . Ace Books is importing **Trevor Hoyle's** THE Q SERIES from England. The first novel is intriguingly titled SEEKING THE MYTHICAL FUTURE . . . **Frederik Pohl** has had two recent publications, a novel from Bantam, SYZYG, that I'm recommending to all my friends interested in earth sciences and to Mt. St. Helens buffs, and PLANETS THREE from Berkley, which collects three long-out-of-print novellas from the '50s. . . An unusual, and certainly the most single-minded novel I've come across in a good while, is **Barry Malzberg's** THE CROSS OF FIRE from Ace. Fable, psycho-novel, or meditation, I'm not sure which, its theme is nothing less than the cutting edge between rabid religiosity and fanaticism, delivered in a highly introspective and morbid narrative voice.

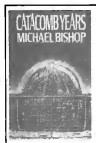
Last November I overlooked a book, and I've been kicking myself ever since. To get off the hook I urge everyone to go out and buy **Frank Robinson's** story collection, A LIFE IN THE DAY



Don Brautigan



Frederic Marvin



Ron Welosky

OF. . . I suppose Robinson is most famous for his part in writing *The Towering Inferno* and for his collaborative bestsellers such as THE GOLD CREW and THE PROMETHEUS CRISIS, but old-time science fiction readers will remember him best for his novel, THE POWER, and a slow trickle of short fiction that appeared in the pages of *Galaxy*, *Astounding*, *Gallery*, and others during the '50s and early '60s. A LIFE IN THE DAY OF . . . is more than just a collection of stories though; it's an autobiography in sketches and one of the most memorable books of last year. ■

# FUTUREFILM

---

By Bill Warren

□While buying Christmas gifts in Tijuana, I watched the shopkeeper wrap my purchases in the movie section of a San Diego newspaper. To my mild surprise, I noticed that every display ad that I could see featured a science fiction, fantasy, or horror movie, including *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *The Fox and the Hound*, and *Escape from New York*. I think that this was the first time my attention was fully called to the fact that fantastic films—"genre films"—have come to be a standard output of the movie industry. Not a fad, but as much a part of the "usual product" as romantic comedies.

There was an extraordinary number of genre pictures released in 1981. There were low-budget trifles like *Blood Beach*, *Dead & Buried*, *Fear No Evil*, and *The Unseen*. And there were the medium-range pictures that seem to predominate in any year: *Alligator*, *Caveman*, *The Hand*, *The Howling*, *Scanners*. And finally, the blockbusters: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Superman II*, *Outland*, *Ghost Story*, *Dragonslayer*.

Obviously some of these derive in one way or another from the success of *Star Wars*. Special effects have become far more important than they used to be, even more than with disaster movies. This clearly serves to explain *Superman II* and some of the others.

But simply an interest in special effects isn't enough to explain that San Diego newspaper page. A clue can be found, however, a clue that means a great deal. Among the biggest SF and horror films, already made or upcoming, are remakes of fantastic films of the 1950s. Already we've seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* Mark II; in production is *The Thing*. Waiting in the wings is a remake of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and a sequel to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. A new *Midwich Cuckoos* (*Village of the Damned*) has been announced. British television remade *Day of the Triffids*.

In Hollywood, nostalgia has a time structure. In the 1930s, there were nostalgic movies being made about the 1890s to the 1900s; in the 1940s, the nostalgia was for the 1900s to the early 1920s; in the '50s, it was for the '20s and the '30s. And so on, always at 20- to 30-year lag times.

For over a decade, nostalgia has centered on the 1950s. There are many reasons for that, beyond the media explosion in that

decade, with television becoming widespread. The people who were children in the 1950s are now not only those who are going to the movies, but those who are *making* the movies. And never in the history of American popular entertainment was a decade so suffused and saturated with fantasy as was the 1950s. There were TV shows like "Space Patrol"; almost 200 science fiction and horror movies; the "Shock Theater" package on television; a revival of superhero comic books; and monster-movie magazines (apparently the one thing in common among virtually all modern-day makers of genre pictures is that they grew up on Forrie Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland*).

Older people, whose nostalgia is for fantasy more specifically aimed at adults, cannot quite understand the appeal of some of these pictures. But the appeal is legitimate—and it's going to last for a long time to come. Some are predicting the collapse of the fantastic-film boom, but I suspect that that collapse will not come for years. Because, since the 1950s, this emphasis on fantasy and science fiction for young people has simply not ceased. It changes form from time to time—in the late '50s, SF movies petered out, and horror films, those of Hammer Films of England and their imitators, came back. There was a slack period in the mid-'60s until 2001 started things up again. Ever since then, the number and importance of fantastic films have been significant. The nostalgia 25 years from now will be for *Star Wars* and *Superman*.

The audiences of today don't have to be informed what faster-than-light drive is, what aliens are, how werewolves work, why Superman is a valid figure (the people *making* the Superman films haven't a clue, however). In short, the content of genre films is a part of their daily lives. Science fiction books are read by everyone, not just by the school misfits, as they were for many years. To the dismay of some long-time fans, science fiction no longer belongs just to them; it belongs to this entire generation.

It really is here to stay.

### THE DARK CRYSTAL

Jim Henson, creator of the Muppets, is attempting to expand his mini-empire. I don't think he's really seeking to eliminate human actors from films, but his ambitious *The Dark Crystal* is one of the first live-action pictures to feature virtually no human beings at all—or at least, none recognizable as such.

Yoda, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, was essentially a Muppet, although Henson dislikes the use of that term for Yoda and the constructs used in *The Dark Crystal*. The creatures in the new film, due out in May, are partially done in the hand-and-rod-puppet

Muppet style. But Henson and his partner, Frank Oz, are turning more to electronic and cable-controlled puppets. I feel Henson is doing himself a disservice in not calling these characters Muppets, but it's also true they are a long way from Kermit the Frog's terrycloth construction.

*The Dark Crystal* is a Tolkienesque fantasy set on a distant world, a planet with three suns. On this world, magic works.

In the past, the evil Skekses learned of a prophecy which foretold that a Gelfling would someday come and destroy their reign, so they attempted to destroy all the Gelflings on their world. They thought they were successful, but a baby Gelfling—they are much like elves, as the name implies—is found and raised by the Urru.

The Urru, rather llama-oid in appearance, with four arms, two legs, and a tail, are the mystic philosophers of this world. They live, in fact, in Mystic Valley, where they guard the old ways and the old gods. They have found that to overthrow the reign of the Skekses, under whose dark power the planet is beginning to wither and die, a fragment of the Dark Crystal must be rejoined with the parent body during the conjunction of the three suns. The Dark Crystal is in the possession of the Skekses, and gives them their dread power.

Jen, the surviving Gelfling, is first sent by the Urru to the observatory of Aughra (a morally ambiguous character), but he's followed there by one of the vulture-like Skekses and the Garthim, lobsteroid warriors in the employ of the Skekses. They attack the observatory, but Jen manages to escape with the shard of the Dark Crystal.

While escaping, he encounters Kira, a female Gelfling who, like Jen, had been found in a burned-out Gelfling dwelling. She was found by the Pod People (who look not like Donald Sutherland, but like apple dolls), bucolic farmers of this far world. The dark cloud under which they live is the occasional Garthim capture and enslavement of a few Pod People, who are then forced to serve the Skekses.

The Skekses find Jen with the Pod People, and endeavor to convince him that Skekses are really good, kind, and misunderstood types. True to the code of heroes everywhere, Jen will have none of this. But he still needs to get close to the Dark Crystal, and so he accompanies them to their palace, where the climax of the picture takes place.

The story was written by Jim Henson and David O'Dell, with additional dialogue by Alan Garner. It was produced by Henson and Gary Kurtz, and directed by Henson and Frank Oz. The entire

film, including all the sets and characters—over 70 types in all, including woodland animals—was designed by Brian Froud. I think we can safely assume there will be considerable merchandising centering on *The Dark Crystal*. The music is by Trevor Jones, who was in charge of the music for *Excalibur*. The voices are by both American and British character actors, though they are mostly unknowns. Universal will be releasing the picture on May 21 in the United States.

A few of the characters, including slender-legged striding beasts that the Gelfling ride, are men in suits, but most of the characters are done by puppetry in one form or another. Some of the creatures take as many as six people to operate.

It's too soon to tell if this picture is a mad aberration on the part of Jim Henson and his coworkers, or a novel approach to the creation of fantasy films. One difficulty that has always prevented live-action fantasies from being fully realized is that all characters must be played by human beings to be truly believable. Stop-motion animation is useful but limited, and has an aura of unreality that many find annoying. A mixture of human beings and artificial creatures is also difficult to bring off, because of the contrast between what we see and what we know to be real. Perhaps these "dreadnought-class Muppets," as a publicity worker referred to them (until he was firmly told to cease), are what are needed to create a fully realized other world, populated by believable, realistic creatures that are not human. In the case of *The Dark Crystal*, I suspect the derivative story may get in the way of complete acceptance, but if Henson and Oz can bring it off, the door has been opened wide to fantasy of all kinds. ■

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# NOW PLAYING

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By Charles Platt

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**Heartbeeps** A Universal Picture, produced by Michael Phillips, directed by Allan Arkush, written by John Hill, starring Andy Kaufman and Bernadette Peters.

**Modern Problems** Twentieth Century Fox, Executive Producer Douglas C. Kenney, produced by Alan Greisman and Michael Shamberg, directed by Ken Shapiro, written by Ken Shapiro & Tom Sherohman & Arthur Sellers, starring Chevy Chase.

---

Once in a while a comic movie accomplishes much more than merely making us laugh. No matter how basically silly or whimsical the story may be, by tapping the social roots of humor it evokes all manner of serious implications.

**Heartbeeps** is a classic example. A piece of light entertainment trading on the "cuteness" of a cast of robots, it also manages to be clever, witty, and full of questions about our strange obsession with building humanoid replicas of ourselves.

ValCom 17485, a robot valet who looks like Liberace dipped in Formica Floorshine, is sent for repair after dropping something on his foot. Stored overnight in the robot factory, Val (played by Andy Kaufman) strikes up conversation with AquaCom 89045 (Bernadette Peters), a humanoid "social companion" whose main task is generating small talk to stroke the egos of rich businessmen sunbathing beside swimming pools. In a sequence of slightly heavy-handed social satire, she conveys her rudimentary knowledge of human psychology to Val, whose vocabulary is normally limited to comments about the stock market "with special data on lumber commodities."

Intentionally ridiculous comic relief is added in the form of a third robot in for repair, Catskil 55602, whose sole ability is to tell bad one-liners of the Catskill country club variety. (Example: Hotel guest complains, "I gotta leak in the sink in my room." Management replies: "Sir, the customer is always correct. Go right ahead.")

Easily evading complacent human guards, the three robots make a break for freedom. They hijack a repair truck, drive into open country, and ultimately crash the vehicle in a distant glade. Forced



to continue on foot (in the case of Catskil, on tracks), they take spare-part supplies from the truck with them by using the parts to build Phil, a junior robot with a body fabricated from the truck's antiquated Philco radio.

Embarking on an odyssey of self-discovery, punctuated by bad jokes and moments of tongue-in-cheek whimsy, Val and Aqua make lovable attempts to imitate human roles—lovable not only because machines are less smart than people but because they're without malice, without sin. There are, I think, deliberate religious overtones here, as the robots play Adam and Eve in a verdant landscape every bit as beautiful as Eden.

Lacking not only sin but soul, robots also can be seen as being closer to the animal kingdom than to us. Indeed, kids' love for R2D2 is on a par with their affection for bears at the zoo. *Heartbeeps* graphically demonstrates the animal/robot link when Phil encounters a woodland rabbit, machine and animal sniffing and investigating each other with equal lack of guile.

Meanwhile the robots' escape from the factory is detected, and human technicians go searching for them. These efforts are feeble, however, compared with the performance of Crimebuster, a robot cop built like a miniature amphibious tank. Cutting a swathe through the forest, Crimebuster machine-guns tree stumps for the hell of it while singing "America the Beautiful" over its bullhorn in a voice that sounds like Broderick Crawford.

Crimebuster snares our robot pilgrims in Small Town USA (where they are seeking fresh energy packs), and paralyzes them in the glare of its spotlights. To alleviate the victims' boredom while they are held pending the arrival of human authorities, Crimebuster plays them Muzak—"The Girl from Ipanema"—in a particularly memorable tableau.

Our pilgrims find sanctuary in a junkyard, make repeated sacrifices for their offspring Phil (literally donating pieces of themselves for his survival), and finally run out of power near the factory of their origin, in a moment of deliciously overplayed romantic pathos followed by a rather unconvincing happy ending which saves the film from being a more appropriately tragic fable.

At times the script sounds like several Spocks arguing with each other (for instance, when Val earnestly explains that God is "an irrational unknown variable which humans associate with the value judgment known as goodness"). At other times, it's full of deliberately corny jokes. It's a silly movie; any movie where actors dress up in plastic outfits and walk like marionettes has got to be silly. But there's a fine line between this and the "silliness" of Franken-

stein. And an unpretentious comedy can tell us more about ourselves than a serious study of the subject, just as **Dark Star** (very similar in spirit to **Heartbeeps**) told us more about human nature than **2001** ever could.

**Heartbeeps** is a product of "outsiders"—people whose wit and imagination survive relatively unfettered by Hollywood cynicism and mass-market corporate policy. For a reminder of how relentlessly dumb "insiders" of the Hollywood family entertainment machine can be, you can't find a better example than **Modern Problems**.

This short and simple-minded fantasy about psychic powers opens as farce, introducing Chevy Chase as Max, a half-asleep, bumbling air traffic controller. The plot then meanders ponderously into maudlin romance: Max's (unexplained) jealous nature and (unexplained) general nihilism cause his girlfriend to walk out on him. His telekinetic faculty—the idea on which the whole movie is supposed to rest—does not develop during the interminable first half-hour, in which characters mumble tiresome platitudes about relationships in a series of totally implausible chance encounters.

When Max finally acquires his telekinetic powers as a result of contact with atomic wastes, there is potential for creative comedy. But the powers are never explored or developed, and never used with imagination. The few jokes are staged with numbing slowness, allowing everyone in the audience to become weary with anticipation of the obvious. And the humor is vindictive rather than cathartic, as Max inflicts ruinous pratfalls on a harmless ballet dancer, and a chronic nosebleed on an ineffectual theatrical agent.

Lingering awkwardly in closeup with his amiable but meaningless grin, Chevy Chase seems intended to function as some form of lovable folk hero. This, of course, is more Hollywood thinking: the star draws the audience and the script doesn't matter, just so long as it contains low-IQ humor, simplistic love interest, and titillation for the teenagers (in this case, a bedroom interlude calculated to rouse prepubescent sniggers).

The saddest part of all this is that the industry treats **Heartbeeps** and **Modern Problems** as if they're identical: cheap exploitation fare for families during the holiday season. The Hollywood entertainment machine has traded so often in the debased creativity of TV-sitcom-level movies that it has lost not only the capacity to develop real talent, but the capacity even to recognize it. ■

# MONSTERS



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by Vincent Price and V. B. Price

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Of men and monsters... Father-and-son experts lead this guided tour into the darker side of human nature.

**T**he fear of monsters that begins in childhood and lives on in many adults as anxiety is a devastating kind of fear that serves no useful purpose. Anxiety monsters are devilishly persistent and hard to eradicate, sometimes even after years of therapy. The vividness of the childhood monsters fades into invisibility, but their lingering presence is signaled by vague feelings of dread, quirky fears one can't identify, or the hosts of phobias that plague otherwise

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reasonable and intelligent people.

These formless, purposeless monsters were a favorite subject of Francisco de Goya, who wrote, "Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with it, she is the mother of the arts and origin of its marvels." To Goya, monsters were aberrant by-products of a poorly integrated use of the imagination. Yet he was highly successful at blending the monster image and art, producing simultaneously beautiful and horrifying paintings and even incorporating monsters into his social criticism. Goya, apparently, was a basically healthy individual who could indeed entertain "impossible monsters" without abandoning reason, and the results are provocative.

Fantasy devoid of reason, according to Goya, can result in madness, or at least in some decidedly unwanted houseguests of the imagination. Some people attempt to reconcile themselves to their presence by trying to accommodate them. Two poems by Robert Frost speak of that foreboding of nameless, faceless, senseless terror. The people in the following poems have found way to coexist with their monsters by striking an unequal bargain with them:

"House Fear"

Always—I will tell you this  
they learned—

Always at night when they  
returned  
to the lonely house from far  
away  
to lamps unlighted and fire  
gone gray  
they learned to rattle the lock  
and key  
to give whatever might chance  
to be  
warning and time to be off in  
flight.

Monsters reside both within and  
without the house in Frost's  
poems:

"The Oft-Repeated Dream"

She had no saying dark  
enough  
for the dark pine that kept for-  
ever  
trying the window latch.  
It had never been inside the  
room  
and only one of the two  
was afraid in an oft-repeated  
dream  
of what the tree might do.

Are there not many adults  
who would admit they cough  
loudly at the top of the base-  
ment steps before checking the  
furnace? And are there not in-  
telligent, responsible grown-ups  
who take a giant leap into bed  
in order to avoid the grasp of  
whatever lurks under it? And  
how many bathroom lights burn  
all night long, the door slightly  
ajar, in lonely motel rooms across  
the land? Even in many homes,

tidy havens of comfort during the day, a little night light glows somewhere until dawn. Who could criticize these small precautions indulged in by otherwise reasonable people plagued by anxiety? The monsters leave them ill at ease for reasons that do not involve the conscious mind.

Anthropologist Joseph Campbell looks at the shapeless form of these secret terrors with a deeper interpretation:

"The unconscious sends out all sorts of vapors, odd beings, terrors, deluding images up into the mind, whether in dreams, broad daylight, or insanity. For the human kingdom beneath, the floor of the comparatively neat little dwelling we call our unconscious goes down into unexpected Aladdin's caves. There not only jewels but also dangerous jinn abide. Dangerous because they threaten the fabric of security into which we have built ourselves and our family. But they are fiendishly fascinating too. . . ."

That "human kingdom" from which monsters of anxiety surface is a place remote and secret enough to give license to unlimited creativity. Scientific minds may be more at home with tangibles that lend themselves to

the logic of proof, but when they concern themselves with the underworld of the mind, they can offer some insight. Some call their theories scientific myths. Myth or reality, the scientists' view of intangible monsters of anxiety that plague those who turn to them for assistance can help give shape to the beasts that hide within us. As elusive as the monster of Loch Ness—there, but where? And how long? And what shape, and what are its plans? The answers to all these burning questions can be found in many disciplines: comparative mythology, embryology, philosophy, anthropology, zoology, comparative biology, and of course psychology. All the theories of the experts conclude with the same opinion—that we should look into ourselves, see our monsters of anxiety, and then get better acquainted with them.

Now it is time to investigate why certain monsters have shed their form and burrowed their way into the mind—an act of uncommon monster cowardice. The most spectacular appearances of these elusive monsters of our unconscious are in dreams. And what are the three most commonly dreamed fears? Fear of falling, fear of being chased, and fear of snakes. Surely in two-thirds of the most common nightmares—the electrifying, heart-stopping variety—there are monsters involved.

According to Carl Sagan in *The Dragons of Eden*, the fear of falling is a terrifying remnant of our primate past. When we lived in trees, falling out of them was one of our greatest dangers, especially during that dangerous transition between wakefulness and sleep. The protective reflex that kept humans from plunging to earth while falling asleep is so strong that sleepers may have to assure themselves that they are lying safely in bed. Like the appendix, this heart-stopping protective reaction is an evolutionary remnant that has outlived its usefulness. Charles Darwin pursued a similar route to the origins of our fears in *The Descent of Man*:

"The horrible dream of the unknown hung like a thick cloud over savage life, and embittered every pleasure. . . . May we not suspect that the vague but very real fears of children which are quite independent of experience are inherited effects of real dangers and abject superstitions during savage times? It is quite comfortable with what we know of the transmission of formerly well-developed characters, that they should appear at an early period of life and afterwards disappear."

From the serpent in the Gar-

den of Eden, which God relegated to crawl ignominiously on its belly through the ages, to the evil race of serpents that guard the Hindu underworld, reptiles have always been the most feared of all earthly creatures and also among the most fascinating. The reptile house is often one of the most popular attractions in many zoos. Yet many people shudder when they come across the picture of a snake in a book, and may even try to turn the page without touching.

Whatever shadowy thing pursues us in our nightmares—and who among us is brave enough to turn around and look?—the beast is usually felt, not seen, as something alien, cold, and repellent, like an ancient reptilian memory. But why is the monster image frequently cast in the form of snakes, dragons, serpents, and other scaled and horned creatures? Special heart-stopping terror must be in our genes.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is another observer of human nature who agreed that our greatest fears predate human history, emerging unchanged in our dreams. In *From Human All Too Human*, he writes:

"In our dreams we pass through the whole thought of earlier humanity. I mean, in the same way that man reasons in his dreams, he reasoned in the waking state many thousands of years ago . . . The dream car-

ries us back into earlier states of human culture and it affords us a means of understanding it better."

Of the many explorers of the human mind, the one who was the most compelled to find the roots of our unconscious fears in our remote past was Carl Jung. Where better place for monsters to lurk, Jung postulated, than in the dark recesses of the unconscious? Monsters, he postulated, also expand the outer limits of understanding. Since five senses are limiting, nothing that remains within the confines of reality can be fully comprehended, but monsters can help us disassociate ourselves from the limits of that reality.

Now that the scientists have been heard from on the subject of anxiety monsters, it is time to return to the poets, who earn their living by opening up the unconscious and involving the reader in visceral emotional responses to poetic images.

The age of anxiety has become a synonym for the twentieth century. Although surely there has never been a time in history that was not filled with savagery, our century has compounded anxiety by the addition of new horrors, all of them invisible: rampant cancer, nuclear fallout, chemical poisoning, acid rain, destruction of the ozone layer—all life-threatening evils

that often cannot be detected until it is too late. Two poets, W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot, have addressed themselves to the special anxieties of our time. Auden's poem "The Age of Anxiety" applied a label to modern times that has only become more appropriate with every passing decade.

Auden once wrote, "The world needs a wash and a week's rest." He saw the 1920s, with one war ended and another one brewing, as a time without magic or religion in which all monsters and demons had been neatly expurgated, leaving an antiseptic place fraught with boredom:

'Then he harrowed Hell,  
healed the abyss  
of torpid instinct and trifling  
flux,  
Laundered it, lighted it, made  
it loveable with  
Cathedrals and theories;  
Thanks to him brisker smells  
abet us  
Cleaner clouds accost our vision  
and honest sounds our ears.  
For he ignored the night-  
mares, annexed their  
ranges,  
Put the clawing chimaeras in  
cold storage,  
Berated the Riddle till it roared  
and fled  
Won the battle of whispers,  
Stopped the Stupids, stormed  
into  
the Fumbler's forts, confined  
the Sulky

to their drab ditches and drove  
the crashing  
Bores to their bogs,  
their beastly moor."

Where are the raging dragons  
of old? Gone the way of Auden's  
chimaera and sphinx. How can  
a person put up a good fight  
against Stupids, Fumblers, the  
Sulky, the Drab, and the Crash-  
ing Bores?

Auden's heart lay in other  
times, "the primal age," when  
people "danced their dream  
wishes":

"Unicorns galumphed through  
lilies;  
Little mice played with great  
cock-a-hoop cats  
Courteous griffins waltzed  
with wyverns and the wild  
horses  
drew nigh their neighbors and  
neighed with joy  
All feasting with friends . . .  
What faded you to this drab  
dusk? O the drains are  
clogged  
Rain-rusted, the roofs of the  
privies have fallen in . . ."

One of the greatest problems  
of modern living is having no  
flesh-and-blood monster images  
to be destroyed for us by some  
hero braver than ourselves. Bring  
back the dragons, Auden says.  
Bring back Satan and his min-  
ions, Medusa and Fenris and  
the Big Bad Wolf. Not long after  
these poems were written, the

monsters did come back in full  
force . . . and they're still com-  
ing. They have new names: King  
Kong, the Birds, the Blob, the  
Mummy, "Jaws," Rosemary's  
Baby, and Darth Vader. To  
everyone's vast relief, the re-  
surgence of fictional monsters  
rescued the twentieth century  
from the scourge of Auden's  
too-safe, dreadfully boring world  
without terror.

T. S. Eliot was another critic  
of ennui, of life "measured out  
in coffee spoons," and one of  
his most famous poems depicts  
an arid landscape where people  
purposelessly wander. Perhaps  
a good-sized monster let loose  
in "The Love Song of J. Alfred  
Prufrock" would have diverted  
some of the narrator's attention  
away from his socks and bald  
spot to some real horrors.

But Eliot, like all those with  
inquisitive minds, "did not see  
as others saw," and what he  
saw in "The Waste Land" was  
an anxiety monster—threat-  
ening, intangible, and wearing  
a hood:

"Who is the third who walks  
always beside you?  
When I count, there are only  
you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the  
white road  
There is always another one  
walking beside you  
Gliding, wrapt in a brown  
mantle, hooded,  
I do not know whether a man  
or a woman.



—But who is that on the other side of you?"

Another kind of invisible monster image has a meaning far different from the ungeneralized anxiety discussed so far, and that is the shape the dead take when they return. They have a host of names—ghosts, poltergeists, doppelgangers, banshees, dybbuks. Unlike most anxiety monsters, these death spirits represent a very reasonable fear, for nothing in fact causes more anxiety than death, and many cultures take elaborate precautions to make sure the dead stay dead. When an ancient Greek went into battle, the red-robed, daggertoothed Keres were always hovering nearby. If fate had decreed that the warrior should die, the scream of the Keres were the last sounds heard as he drew his last breath. These demons swooped down upon his cooling body, and his last sensation on earth was a monster's tongue lapping up his blood. The anticipation of such an end could scarcely have been less terrifying than the experience of death itself.

Another shrieking prophet of death is the banshee of Irish and British folklore. She appears in many guises, sometimes as a beautiful young girl weeping over the impending death of a dear one, again as a hag foretelling death in a soul-chilling wail. The night-cry of the ban-

shee can sometimes be heard by believers outside the windows of the old and the desperately ill. Many a survivor of virulent epidemics has lived to tell of the chilling wail that came the night before the worst of all disasters; the sight of a banshee was a washerwoman come to scrub the bloody clothes of someone about to die.

When people are convinced they are being haunted, there is little that can be done to change their minds. Even sensible people succumb, despite convincing evidence that makes one wonder at how so many people could have been simultaneously deluded. This is particularly true of poltergeists, a German word that means "noisy spirit." In fact, being haunted by a poltergeist is unforgettable, for objects move about, chairs and tables clatter, dishes break, and pictures fall from the walls as the spirit creates a ruckus. Poltergeists were originally thought to be the invisible perpetrators of the supernatural made visible. However, investigations have resulted in findings that eliminate the necessity to believe in the phenomenon. The most prevalent theory is that the power at work is psychokinesis, or mental energy. Certain people have demonstrated this rare ability to cause objects to move through their powers of concentration, thereby stripping poltergeists of their ghostly connection.

Two other invisible monsters are the German doppelganger, a ghost of possession; and the dybbuk, its Hebrew counterpart. The Hebrew word literally means "attachment," implying an alien spirit that connects itself to a living person, much like a parasite to its host. Dybbuks are the ghosts of sinners who have found no peace in death and must take refuge in other people's lives, causing their victims to undergo endless battles between their own good consciences and the evil presence within them. The only way to cast out a dybbuk is through exorcism.

Another species of ghost is that which speaks to us from the other side of death, thus providing a rare insight for the living into what goes on in the minds of the disembodied spirits that frighten us so much. After such a ghost is heard from, one's attitude toward the supernatural will never be the same again.

Think of Hamlet. It is almost morning. For several nights the castle has been visited by an apparition that seems to be looking for a particular person. When at last the ghost appears, the soldiers on watch attempt to stab it with their swords:

*Tis here!*

*Tis here!*

*Tis gone.*

The cock crows, for no dead thing can bear the light of day. One of the soldiers talks wist-

fully about the effects of goodness on evil spirits, witches, and ghosts, meaning to soothe himself and his comrades.

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes

Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,

This bird of dawning singeth all night long,

And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,

The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm.

So hallowed and gracious is that time."

The following night the ghost appears again, and this time he finds the man he is looking for. Still he will not speak, but only beckons with outstretched hand. The two go alone, and the ghost speaks at last, describing the awfulness of being dead and of the terror yet to come, the worst of which he is forbidden to reveal:

"Doomed for a certain time to walk the night,

And for the day confined to fast in fires,

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purged away.

But that I am forbid

To tell the secrets of my prisonhouse,

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

Make thy two eyes like stars  
start from their spheres,  
List, list, O, list!

If thou didst ever thy dear  
father love—

Revenge his foul and most  
unnatural murder."

The ghost then reveals the hideous details of the death he suffered at the hands of his own brother while his son was away at school. Dawn begins to break. The ghost must leave before the cock crows.

*Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.*

If ever there was a spirit that need not plead to be remembered, it is the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Fear estranged from reality, fantasy abandoned by reason, monsters without form, impervious to the blades of heroes: these invisible fiends sleep in our minds during the day to stalk us as we dream. Who let them in, and why won't they go away? We are free to ask, but anxiety monsters never answer.

### Epilogue by Vincent Price

A number of years ago I found myself sitting in one of the most magical and mysterious places I've ever been. I happened on it quite by accident, and realized I'd never heard of it before. It was in Italy, a country of constant surprises, a land I love and

thought I knew rather well. When I paid the modest admission price to this particular surprise, I found myself quite alone walking down a dreamy garden path; and then, quite suddenly, I was not alone at all but surrounded by a world of incredible stone creatures. At first I was genuinely startled. I actually jumped—well, not out of my skin, but out of my senses. I opened my mouth in amazement and then out came a clamor of joyous laughter that startled even me. I felt the stone creatures, too, were somehow delighted that I—Vincent Price, the "master of the macabre," the goosepimple grandee—should be the victim of surprise.

I was in Bomarzo, a monumental fantasyland commissioned by the whimsical Renaissance nobleman, Duke Vincenzo Orsini. Built toward the end of the sixteenth century near Viterbo, outside Rome, it's generally referred to as the Park of the Monsters. Though no one is really sure who designed it, an architect named Vignola is sometimes given the credit. The duke's pleasure garden was built in a boulder-filled valley behind his castle, at the end of a secret tunnel. Orsini ordered his sculptors and designers to work with the "living rock" *in situ* (it would have been impossible to move the boulders anyway, so immense are they) and carve them into gigantic images of monsters.

When the duke had a gathering in the park, his guests were ushered in between two bosomy sphinxes and then led down a path to a terrace that looked out over the valley. It must have been an astonishing apparition. It's all overgrown now, but in those days it was an idyllic landscape with formal gardens manicured to perfection. And in that ordered setting one would see insane things like bigger-than-life-size elephants, a writhing dragon, a sculpture of a huge nude reclining amid the flowers. There were gargantuan mermaids, too, and acorns and pine cones that were six feet high. One dined in the mouth of a monster mask that could have only been interpreted by Renaissance guests as representing the jaws of Hell. Heads seemed to be all over the park, including a particularly grotesque one from which the valley's stream emerged. There was even what appeared to be a lovely Greek temple, but on closer inspection one discovered that it was decorated with skulls and crossbones. To top it off there was an elephantine statue of Cerberus, the three-headed monster dog of Hell.

I sat myself down on a stone bench beside the stone table inside the jaws of Hell and began to ruminate on the conversations that must have gone on there in its heyday. What did the guests think of their host?

Were they grateful to him for providing the outrageous surprises necessary to divert them from the status quo of their own existences? Surely his guests were aristocrats and privileged people who could indulge themselves with almost any pleasure. Did they find Orsini the inspired and sophisticated lord of a happy circus of grotesqueries, a master of one-upmanship, or the mad proprietor of an oppressive self-indulgence too fantastic even for them? Chances are they found the duke the very soul of charm and glamor. He was probably the great entertainer of his neighborhood and social set. Not only did he provide himself with an unparalleled example of his own power and imagination, he gave Renaissance Rome something new to talk about. Orsini must have been a remarkable man. And he must have had a sense of humor as mammoth as his appetite for monsters.

As I sat there, I felt Bomarzo was made not only for Orsini but for a part of myself as well, one that I hold very dear, the whimsical me. It's the part that's been a life-saver in many times of stress, self-seriousness, and self-pity, for it can quickly change these moods, which we all share, and replace them with, if not always a guffaw, at least a happy smirk. How Orsini must have chuckled at himself and at what surely appeared to be, even to

him, his slightly mad turn of mind. Perhaps Orsini was a secret actor who used Bomarzo as a mask, as a fabulous, inanimate character that permitted him to give full expression to himself. Perhaps the duke needed to be associated with the monster image and its outrageousness to feel complete. Many artists and persons of a flamboyant nature do. They have used the monster image, embellished it, and made it their calling card. Some did so for deep-seated psychological reasons, I'm sure. Others did so because as entertainers they knew what the duke must have known—that audiences, like friends and acquaintances, love to be pampered with surprises.

The monster image is a sticky business. Even when you don't have anything directly to do with monsters yourself, you're likely to fall under their shadow. For instance, I'm not quite sure I've ever played a real monster, in the "bad" sense of the word. Well, perhaps that's going a little far. It's hard not to sympathize with one's characters. I have played my share of villains—Richard III, the Witch Finder General, among them—but usually the people I play in the movies are either insane or victims of some terrible injustice, like poor Dr. Phibes or Edward Lionheart in *Theatre of Blood*. I did play Dracula once, on a TV comedy show called "F Troop" with Forrest Tucker and Larry

Storch, but my version would hardly have caused a shiver. Still, I'm associated with monsters. Many people think I played the title role in *The Fly*, but I didn't: I was the good guy; David Hedison was the monster. And what a superb monster he was! He took the life beneath the fabulous fly mask, created by makeup man Ben Nye and others, very seriously. In spite of the obvious discomfort of balancing the monstrous head of an insect blown up to human proportions, Hedison was able to create enormous pathos for the predicament of his character. By gesture and deportment he conveyed a man not crazed by his unhappy situation, but resigned and determined to spare others pain. It's a proven formula for other movie monsters—Quasimodo hiding in his bell tower, Frankenstein's monster not able to hide what little humanity was left in him. Even Dracula has the decency to sleep off his nighttime blood feast in a coffin and leave the frightened citizens alone for the day.

The actor's problem under mask is very different from when his bare face is hanging out. Makeup and costume seem to call for a larger approach to the art of make-believe. Here the problem is to make the unbelievable believable, the grotesque natural, and monstrous normal. The monster must be

larger than life to be twice as terrifying. There's a strange relationship here between the monster image as a mask the artist wears, and the monster that the artist might be to himself. The problems of the face in the mirror always seem larger and more terrifying than "reality." Of course, it would be a gross error to say that all, or even a majority of, artists who've dressed their imaginations up in the monster image have been troubled or in mental distress. That's just not so. In my profession particularly the great animators of the image—people like my dear friend Boris Karloff or that talented and consummate pro Peter Lorre—had no more problems than the rest of us. Picasso, who used the image continually in later life, particularly in his minotaur series, was not in any sense a mentally troubled man. But nonetheless, for many artists of the monstrous their own lives were more terrible than the creatures or stories they created.

When Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1885, he was living through a nightmare of poverty and disease, desperately trying to make a living as a writer while suffering from tuberculosis and "writer's block." No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't come up with an idea for a salable story. He had to wait until it came to him in a dream—which

it did—a terrifying apparition of a man divided against himself, half-saint, half-monster. The nightmare of creation saved Stevenson from the nightmare of his life, but by creating Mr. Hyde he must have revealed to himself the intensity of his own deeply pessimistic side.

No artist of the nineteenth century, or of our own, for that matter, has been so identified with horror and the macabre as Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's personality was as comfortable with the monster image as John Wayne's was with the mantle of hero. Chronically morbid, poor, insanely depressed, the gothic writer described himself as a "weary, wayworn wanderer" who was hounded by an "imp of the perverse." Poe's life was as horrible in its own way as any of the stories he wrote—though perhaps he wrote such stories partly to console himself with the knowledge that he could still dream up lives more terrible than his own. When Poe died at the age of forty, he was wracked by madness and alcoholism and was all but unrecognized by the literary heroes of his day. Yet his was a universal genius. He mined the inexhaustible sources of human mystery to produce some of the brightest, or perhaps I should say darkest, jewels ever to adorn our vain desire to know all we can about the forbidden, the shocking, and the violent.

Poe's work is among the greatest examples of the enormous appeal of the macabre. In the past few years I have given hundreds of readings of his poems and prose. Recently the brilliant young American composer-conductor Leonard Slatkin wrote a symphonic tone poem for me to narrate with symphony orchestras. It's called *The Raven* and includes several Poe poems, culminating with "The Raven" itself and those horribly beautiful lines:

"And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting  
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;  
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,  
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

With Slatkin's music the effect is even more stunning, and audiences of all ages seem to love it. It's been said that Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" is a glossary of all human fear. Read it sometime with that in mind, and you will recognize most phobias, many of your own.

A universal genius though Poe's was, it still derived from

the psychological anomalies of his own private life. The same is true for two other Victorians, the painters Richard Dadd and Johann Heinrich Füssli. Dadd is the creator of one of the gentlest monster paintings ever made—a lush, tenderly romantic eccentricity called *The Fairy Feller's Masterstroke*. It depicts a royal gathering of pixies, fairies, and elves all of whom have been frozen in suspended animation by a magic spell. In the center of the picture is the "Fairy Feller," who is about to crack a nut with a heavy mallet and in so doing release the little people from the spell. Who knows what was going on in Dadd's mind when he painted the picture? It's possible that he could have felt that if the Fairy Feller cracked the nut, the monstrous spell cast over his own life might too be broken. Dadd painted the picture while an inmate of the Criminal Lunatic Asylum at Bethlehem Hospital in London. He was incarcerated after being seized by an insane rage that caused him to kill his father. Though never cured, confined to the asylum for the remainder of his life, he retained his skills as a painter and worked on his masterpiece for many years. The spell of madness lasted and lasted for poor Richard Dadd, who died in 1886 at the age of seventy-one.

Füssli, an early influence on William Blake, died in 1825 after

an intense career as a painter of dark, romantic fantasies and as an illustrator of Shakespeare and Milton. When Goethe met Füssli in Rome, he described him by saying, "What fire and fury the man has in him." A close friend of the painter summed up Füssli's character thusly: "He is everything in extremes—always an original. His look is lightning; his word a thunderstorm; his jest is death, his revenge is hell." At one time Füssli, a defrocked minister, claimed the Devil conversed with him like a confidant. His most famous painting is *The Nightmare*, a powerful erotic terror with the raving symbolism of a bug-eyed phallic horse and a hideous, goblinlike monster that pollutes the dreams of a languorous sleeping beauty.

William Blake, who like Füssli modeled much of his painterly style after Michelangelo's, was anything but morbidly degraded. Though many of his contemporaries at the turn of the nineteenth century probably considered him touched, if not a thoroughgoing oddball, Blake was the prophet of vitality, of regeneration, of exuberance, and of communion with the divine. Poet, artist, mystic, he spent most of his waking day, his wife once said, in paradise. Even as a child he saw visions of angels in the treetops, and once he saw God knocking at his window. He saw other things, too—spirits

of creatures would make themselves visible to him from time to time. Once he saw "the ghost of a flea" and from that experience produced one of the most fascinating monster images ever to arise from the imagination of a single person. It was painted in 1819, eight years before his death, and hangs now at the Tate Gallery in London.

A friend of Blake's quoted him as exclaiming when he saw the ghost, "There he comes, his eager tongue whisking out of his mouth, a cup in his hand to hold the blood, and covered with scaly skin of gold and green." What a glorious demon it is—a herculean human form, covered, as he said, with scales, horrible spikes running down its spine, and strange bat-winged flaps jutting from its temples. But, characteristically, the ghost of a lowly, obnoxious creature like a flea is portrayed by Blake in heroic terms. Blake was an appreciator, a praiser, and everything in his eyes, even tiny monsters, deserved his admiration and concern.

Artists in all times have been curious about ugliness and eccentricity, almost to the same extent that they've been curious about beauty. Life is a matter of extremes, and the artist's concern is with everything. The master of the Renaissance in Germanic Europe, Albrecht Dürer, had almost as great a fas-



ination for the grotesque as he did reverence for the goodness of God and his servants on earth. Though known popularly today for his endlessly reproduced but beautiful drawing of *Hands of an Apostle* in prayer, Dürer's *Apocalypse*, the first book to be entirely the work of an artist, was rich in fabulous imagery of devils and death. His interest in curiosities is further evidenced in an engraving he did of a two-bodied monstrous pig. Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of grotesque faces were done with the same loving concern as he lavished on nature in her extremes of placidity and tumult. But when one thinks of ugliness and monsters, one doesn't automatically turn to Dürer or Leonardo. One thinks of Hieronymus Bosch first, and then perhaps of Goya, and possibly of Redon.

Though Bosch's fantastic paintings like *Hell* or *The Garden of Earthly Delights* have been the subject of many a learned treatise on mental illness, Bosch himself was apparently quite sane. Described as "one of the most enigmatic and thought-provoking painters of all time" and "the greatest master of fantasy who ever lived," Bosch is thought to have painted the majority of his work in the service of a heretical Protestant sect in northern Holland. Whatever the denomination—possibly the Mystical Brethren of the Free

Spirit, the Adamites, or the Anabaptists—the meaning of much of Bosch's iconography is incomprehensible today.

He lived at the end of an era, in the twilight of the Middle Ages. The secular and commercial world of the Renaissance-to-be was already making inroads into the pieties of gothic life. The new world with all its unknowns and oddities must have seemed flagrantly abnormal to the minds of provincial Hollanders. As in thousands of other cases one could think of, Bosch used the monster image to give form to the dread that he and his neighbors must have felt while facing the approach of unknown forces and abhorrent new ideas. Bosch lived all his life in a small, out-of-the-way town, at once secure in a known terrain and insulated from firsthand knowledge of world events. His was a fierce time in which religious fire and political cruelty, not to mention poverty and plague, were rulers of the day. Bosch stewed in his own imaginative juices, and monsters of all kinds and shapes seeped to the surface in his pictures. So rich are his images that surrealists have hailed him as an ancestor, Jungians have used him to illustrate their analyses, and art lovers the world over have transformed this alleged devotee of an obscure sect into a cult object himself. And is it any wonder? Nowhere are the

tortures of the damned more delightfully depicted than in his *Hell*; and nowhere are the so-called delights of paradise on earth made to seem so banal and boring in comparison. Bosch might have winced at this interpretation, but indeed all things change, even the value of monsters.

(A brief digression is called for. Anyone who's familiar with the monster mania of our day is well aware that publishers have filled magazine racks with what seems like an endless stream of pulp monsterabilia. I'm continually amazed at how many adults, young adults, enjoy reading such things. On my lecture tours around the country I've tried to question some of the readers. *Why?* The only real answer I get is that they like them. What do they like about them? "They're cute." Cute?! Likable? Why not? When you've got the Sex Pistols and punk rock as competition, even scaly, fire-breathing dragons look friendly.)

Perhaps no other artist has focused so keenly on the monster that is man as the Spanish master Francisco Goya. Living during a time of acute political turmoil, Goya and his contemporaries had to deal not only with the Inquisition, but with the impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon's egomania. Court painter to Ferdinand VII, who was driven from Spain by Napoleon in 1808

and replaced by Joseph Bonaparte, Goya spent his maturity in a world gone insane with savagery and carnage. Appalled by what he saw around him, Goya, the artist, was nonetheless fascinated by it, too. War and human bestiality became objects for his curiosity, subjects for his pen and brush, and the devils of his dreams and subconscious life. Aldous Huxley, in his introduction to *The Complete Etchings of Goya*, wrote, "These creatures who haunt Goya's . . . [work] are inexpressibly horrible, with the horror of mindlessness and animality and spiritual darkness."

The major works of Goya's later years were in response to the outrageousness of his times. They are contained in three collections of etchings—*Los Caprichos*, *The Disasters of War*, and the *Proverbs*—and fantastic murals on the walls of his home outside Madrid. The monster image dominates the etchings, not only the aspect of the image that involves hybrid creatures of demonic power (though those are there in profusion), but also human beasts, witches, and their pious counterparts, whose physical features are accurate masks for the depravity of their lives. One etching in *Los Caprichos* seems to sum up Goya's own feelings about the artist in times of social madness. It's called *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* and shows a writer

or an artist asleep over his table with a swarm of monstrous creatures swirling about his head. The etching reflects not only the chaos around him, but perhaps the periodic sleep of his own reason, which came in the wake of a terrible illness that left him deaf and isolated from others. Near the end of his life Goya bought an out-of-the-way country house that was soon known by his neighbors as *Casa del Sordo*—Deafman's House. Goya quite literally disgorged his imagination on the interior walls of that house. Some scholars have likened those murals to tomb paintings, as if Goya were decorating his own crypt. On one of these walls is the most heroic monster image in the history of art; known as *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*, it shows a wild-eyed old giant gorging on the head and arm of a bloody human form. The murals at Casa del Sordo are referred to as Goya's "black paintings." With their depictions of divine cannibalism, witches, misery, suffering, and murder (one shows two men in a mud hole bashing each other to death with clubs), Goya seems to be purging himself of his terrors, much as ancient painters did in their caves. He seems almost to be performing a magic rite, exorcising the horrors of a lifetime, capturing them in simple paint and rendering them helpless to harm him anymore.

The difference between Goya's life and that of Odilon Redon, the French painter and the illustrator of Poe, Baudelaire, and others, is so extreme that it would seem to exclude any similarity between the two as artists. Yet Redon worked with the same subliminal intensity as Goya. Born in 1840, twelve years after Goya's death, Redon was a contemporary of Gauguin, the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, and critic Charles Baudelaire. He was a gentle, even shy little man, conventional in habits and innocuous in appearance. But he produced two radically different kinds of work. One employed a colorful, almost impressionistic style and dealt with flowers, animals, misty women, and idyllic landscapes. The other involved drawings, lithographs, and paintings of the fantastic and grotesque. It was as if Redon had a split personality. The dark side of his imagination, however, had no effect on his behavior. He was not neurotically morbid, nor did he suffer the torments of emotional extremes. Yet his imagery was as monstrous and marvelous as any in the last 100 years. Redon seemingly used the monster image to give form to those unknown and potentially harmful parts of himself, those things that resided in the deepest regions of his mind. Perhaps this gentle soul maintained his gentility,

and his sanity, by thus cleansing himself of mental poisons. But it's not necessary to explain away Redon's imaginative genius as a form of therapy. The monster image is not pathological. Though excessive and exotic, it is a part of life; there's nothing that says a perfectly normal man can't be his regular self and at the same time be bursting with the marvelous. From all accounts Redon's life was a relatively happy one despite the ever-present nag of financial insecurity. Happiness and the monster image don't cancel out each other.

One series of his lithographs is entitled *Homage to Goya*. In them we see such things as floating disembodied heads and one image, *The Marsh Flower, A Sad Human Head*, is a hybrid of a human plant in the best monster tradition. His illustrations of Poe are full of his favorite motif—an eye floating or soaring through a sinister sky. In one lithograph the eye is in the shape of a balloon, moving, as the title says, "toward infinity." Among my favorites is something called *Gnome*, which is from an early collection called *In the Dream*. The gnome is a circular flying face with bat's wings for ears. It wears a serene expression and seems to resemble a furry star dispensing something akin to reflected glory. That same face is transformed into the image of the *Spider* in

another plate by the simple addition of a set of fiendish legs and an evil leer.

Monsters are everyone's common property. Not everyone, however, knows how to bring them to life. In the past it was the artistic skill of storytellers, priests, and primitive craftsmen that made monsters seem real to the willing imagination of the multitude. In our day it is still the special prerogative of the artist to give substance to fantasy. The actors who play Bottom, or Caliban, or Dracula, or Frankenstein's monster can let their imaginations have free scope, for their job is to identify fantasy with some kind of fact so that the audience will believe in the possible reality of the creatures they're portraying. To make the unbelievable believable is not an easy task. Boris Karloff's Frankenstein's monster has great moments of humanity and stands as a monument to the actor's ability to breathe reality into the unreal. The child or adult who wears a rubber mask designed after Karloff's makeup has little chance to reveal the heart of the monster through its receded eyes. In Oriental drama the great masks lose their meaning without the animation of the actor-mimes. I think this must be why I've always been curious about the Oriental love of fire-breathing dragons—I suppose they're

terrifying to Orientals, but too often they make me think of a Pekingese pet dog wearing makeup.

That brings me to a point I'd like to make about the monstrous in general—its proximity for modern minds to the hysterical, if not in the real sense of that word, at least to the hilarious. The scream is parent to the giggle, and what must have been real horror to the more naive, and believing, minds of less jaded times is now almost a belly laugh even to the very young. So keen is our awareness of the real horror of modern life, communicated to us even through the contaminated air we breathe and much of the contaminating entertainment we watch, that the arts are hard put to scare us with make-believe.

That great lithograph by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch called *The Scream* is symbolically more frightening to us than the stereophonic "Sensurround" of a loud and phony movie like *Earthquake*. Munch's screaming person abandoned to its emotions on that lonely bridge is understandable to a world like ours—in fact *The Scream* is almost a self-portrait of our collective frustrations, which seem to render us helplessly, almost forlornly, enraged. The rarity of silence in our cacophonous world is a real terror—something so new, so utterly unique in the history of human life, that per-

haps it is aiming artists and their audience back to the appreciation of that most primordial of terrors, the unknown. After having indulged ourselves in the horrors of everyday reality, we may be reviving an almost refreshing kind of fear, an awe of the marvelous our ancestors alternately dreaded and enjoyed. It could be that in new art forms like minimalist abstraction (where the artist deals in massive spaces of single or similar colors) we are reviving symbols of the formless fright of the great void with which our ancestors had to do battle by filling it with monster forms they could comprehend.

Among the artists who have dealt with the aberrations of modern man's volatile behavior we find Andy Warhol, who with his likenesses of Campbell's Soup has pictured us as a canned civilization, and Roy Lichtenstein, who sees us as blown-up comic strips uttering monstrous clichés. Robert Rauschenberg envisions twentieth-century American life as an elaboration of litter, and Jackson Pollock, by the controlled accidental in his art, seems to spell us out as a jumble of computer wiring gone mad. Christo wraps our buildings in cellophane and hangs curtains across the countryside, and Willem De Kooning breaks us up, especially the female of the species, into fang-bared brutes once beautiful. More than any of them

the English painter Francis Bacon unashamedly portrays our demented frailty. Bacon talks of art like a mythological hunter tracking unspeakable demons. He says his intention is to try "to paint the track left by human beings—like the slime left by snails."

But for artists this is nothing new. They have consistently referred to our monstrous side. The human-headed bulls of Assyria, the sphinx, the minotaur—half-man, half-monster—it would seem we have always suspected that is the way we are. And is not the artists' report of us usually right? When we became victims of the machine age, the mechanical man, the

robot, was the threat. And to this day our fascination with our possible self-destruction is a star attraction, even if it's dolled up in the Buck Rogers banalities of *Star Wars*. We look to outer space as the source of our salvation, as in the uniquely hopeful *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or as the home of invading monsters. But our greatest handiwork, the disassembled atom, splits itself to create monstrous spiders, ants, and blobs. We seem to be becoming incapable of seeing anything good in the progress of our civilization. And the cult worship of real-life monsters, starting with Napoleon and going on to Hitler, ends up with monsters who

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think they are gods, like Charlie Manson, the Slasher, the Stocking Strangler, or Africa's Amin. The monstrous side of man's nature is even celebrated in some of our best movies, *The Godfather*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Marathon Man* among them. Man's inhumanity to man is the ever-present spectre before the artist's mind. Even such lightweight, if talented, painters like Salvador Dali have dealt with war, while geniuses like Picasso and Goya have used it as a subject for their most profound statements.

All this might lead one to the conclusion that man is indeed the greatest monster of them all and that artists report the monstrous, like hellfire preachers, to give us cause to seriously contemplate, and perhaps to rem-

edy, this side of our natures. But the artist is also capable of seeing the funny aspect of things. The whimsical—thank God for it—leads one to believe that perhaps the only escape from ourselves is through humor. Such was the solution of one of the greatest of wits, George Bernard Shaw—who portrayed the Devil, that ultimate monster, in his play *Man and Superman*—as the supreme sophisticate, a sort of moral hybrid, a soft-hearted tormentor in top hat and tails, who punished evil-doers with an eternity of bonbons, quips, and wise remarks. "Whatever they say about me in churches on earth," Shaw's Devil said, "it is universally conceded in good society that the Prince of Darkness is a gentleman." ■

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# NEVERYONA

by Samuel R. Delany

## 1. OF DRAGONS, MOUNTAINS, TRANSHUMANCE, SEQUENCE, AND SUNKEN CITIES, OR: THE VIOLENCE OF THE LETTER

**S**he was fifteen and she flew.

Her name was pryn—because she knew something of writing but not of capital letters.

She shrieked at clouds, knees clutching scaly flanks, head flung forward. Another peak floated back under veined wings around whose flexing joints her knees bent.

The dragon turned a beaked head in air, jerking reins—vines pryn had twisted in a brown cord before making a bridle to string on the dragon's clay-colored muzzle. (Several times *untwisted* vines had broken—fortunately before take-off.) Shrieking and joyful, pryn looked up at clouds and down on streams, off toward returning lines of geese, at sheep crowding through a rocky rift between one green level and another. The dragon jerked her head, which meant the beast was reaching for her glide's height. . . .

On the ground a bitter, old, energetic woman sat in her shack and mumbled over pondered insults and recalled slights, scratching in ash that had spilled from her fireplace with a dry stick. The old woman, pryn's great aunt, had never flown a dragon, nor did she know her great niece flew one now. What the woman *had* done, many years before, was to take into her home an itinerant, drunken barbarian who'd come wandering through the town market. For nearly five months the soused old reprobate had slept on the young woman's hearth. When he was not sleeping or incoherent with drink, the two of them had talked; and talked; and talked; and taken long walks together, still talking; then gone back to the shack and talked more. Those talks, the older woman would have assured her great niece, were as wonderful as flight. One of



The call of the unknown can be a powerful force.  
But if you're a young adventurer in exotic Neveryóna,  
it can be a dangerous one as well.

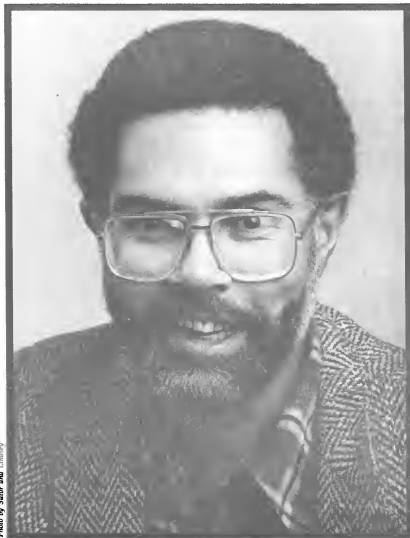


Photo by Sutor and Lindsey

the things the barbarian had done was help her build a wooden rack on which stretched-out fibers might be woven together to make some kind of useful covering. But the talk, the funny and fanciful notions, the tales and terrifying insights, the world lighted and shadowed by the analytic and synthetic richness the two of them could generate between them—that was the thing! One evening the barbarian had up and wandered off again to another mountain hold—for no particular reason. Nor was the aunt worried. They were the kind of friends who frequently went separate ways—for days, even weeks. But after a month rumor came back that, while out staggering about one winter's night, he'd fallen down a cliff, broken both legs, and died sometime over the next three days from injury and exposure.

The loom had not worked right away.

The marshpool fluff that pryn's great aunt had tried to stretch out was too weak to make real fabric, and the sheared fleece from the winter coats of mountain nannies and billies made a fuzzy stuff that was certainly warm but that tore with any violent body movement. But the aunt believed in the "loom" (her word for it in that long-ago distant language) and in the barbarian, whose memory she defended against all vilification.

While her friends in other shacks and huts and cottages felt sorry for the young woman so alone now with her memories, it occurred to the aunt, as she sat before her fireplace on a dim winter's afternoon, watching smoke spiral from the embers: Why not *twist* the fibers first before stringing them on the rack? The "thread" (also her word) she twisted made a far smoother, stronger, and—finally! — functional fabric. And the loom, which had been a tolerated embarrassment among those friends to whom she was always showing it, was suddenly being rebuilt all over Ellamon. Women twisted. Women wove. Many women did nothing *but* twist thread for the weavers, who soon included men. That summer the aunt chipped two holes in a flat stone, wrapped the first few inches of twisted fibers through them, then set the stone to spin, helped on by a foot or a hand, thus using the torque to twist thread ten to twenty times as fast as you could with just your fingers. But with the invention of the spindle (not the aunt's word, but an amused neighbor's term for it), a strange thing happened. People began to suggest that neither she nor the long-dead barbarian were really the loom's inventors; and certainly she could not have thought up thread twisting by herself. And when it became known that there were other

towns and other counties throughout Nevèryon where weaving and spinning had been going on for years—as it had, by now, been going on for years at fabled Ellamon—then all the aunt's claims to authorship became a kind of local joke. Even her invention of the spindle was suddenly suspect. It was too useful, too simple, and just not the kind of thing you "thought up" by yourself. The aunt spun. The aunt wove. The aunt took in the abandoned children of her sister's daughter and, several years later, the grandson of a nephew. For wasn't her shack the warmest in the village? When she had made it, she had filled every chink of it with a mixture of oil and mud into which she had blown hundreds and hundreds of small air bubbles through a hollow reed; it would hold both warm air and cool air for more than twenty-four hours.

From all the looms of fabled Ellamon bolts of goats' wool and dogs' hair cloth and sheepwool rolled out, slower than smoke spiraling over winter embers. The great aunt spoke little with her neighbors, loved her great nieces (and her great nephew—seven years older than pryn—who had recently become a baker), and grew more bitter. What mountain pasturage there was about the High Hold was slowly given over to sheep, already prized for their thin but nourishing milk. (Sheep-

wool clearly made the strongest, warmest cloth. But that, alas, was not among the aunt's particular discoveries.) And more and more milkless, fleeceless dragons leapt from the pastures' ledges and cliffs, with their creaking honks, to tear their wings on treetops and brambles decently out of sight. Because the slopes around Ellamon sported more rockweed than grass, the local shepherds never could raise the best sheep: Ellamon's fabrics were never particularly fabled.

Today pryn's great aunt was over eighty.

The barbarian had slipped drunkenly down the cliff more than fifty years ago.

Bound to the sky by vines twisted the same way her great aunt still twisted goats' fleece and marshpool fluff and dogs' hair into thread that bound that bitter, old, energetic woman to the earth, pryn flew!

She saw the crazily tilting mountains rise by her, the turning clouds above her, the rock-green, the green-licked rock. Somewhere below, sheep, bleating, wandered over another rise. Wind rushed pryn's ears to catch in the cartilages and turn around in them, cackling like a maiden turning from her shuttle to laugh at a companion's scabrous joke. Air battered her eyesockets, as a wild girl pounds the wall of the room where she has been shut in by

a mother terrified her child might, in her wildness, run loose and be taken by slavers. Air rushed pryn's toes; her toes flexed up, then curled in the joy, in the terror of flight. Wind looped coolly about pryn's arms, pushed cold palms against her kneecaps.

They glided.

And much of the space between pryn and the ground had gone.

She had launched from a ledge and, through common sense, had expected to land on one. How else to take off once more? Somehow, though, she'd assumed the dragon knew this too.

Trees a-slant the slope rose.

She pulled on the reins, hard. Wings flopped, fluttered, flapped behind her knees; pryn leaned back in wind, searching for ledges in the mountains that were now all around.

She glanced down to see the clearing—without a ledge any side! Treetops veered, neared.

That was where they were going to land. . . ? Leaves atop a tall tree slapped her toes, stinging. She yanked vines. Dragon wings rose, which meant those green membranes between the long bones would not tear on the branches. But they were falling—no, still gliding. She swallowed air. The dragon tilted, beating back against her own flight—pryn rocked against the bony neck. Reins tight, she

knuckled scales. Dragon muscle moved under her legs. A moment's floating, when she managed to push back and blink. And blinked again—

—because they jarred, stopping, on scrub and pebbles.

A lurch: the dragon stepped forward.

Another lurch: another step.

She pulled on the reins again.

The slow creature lurched another step . . . and halted.

She craned to see the trees behind her. Above them, rock—  
"Hello!"

The dragon took another step; pryn swung forward.

The woman, cross-legged across the clearing by the fireplace, uncrossed and pushed to one knee. "Hello, there!" She stood, putting a hand on the provision cart's rail beside her. "That your dragon?" The ox bent to tear up ragged rockweed; the cart rumbled for inches. The rail slipped under the woman's palm.

Swinging her leg over the dragon's neck, pryn slid down scales, feeling her leather skirt roll up the backs of her thighs. On rough ground she landed on two feet and a fist—"Yes! . . ."—and came erect in time to duck the wing that opened, beat once, then folded. "I mean—I rode it . . ."

The woman was middle-aged, some red left in her hair. Her face was sunburned and freckled.

With suspicion and curiosity, pryn blinked. Then, because she had flown, pryn laughed. It was the full, foaming laugh of a loud, brown, fifteen-year-old with bushy hair. It broke up fear, exploded curiosity, and seemed—to the woman, at any rate—to make the heavy, short girl one with the pine needles and shalechips and long, long clouds pulled sheer enough to see blue through.

That was why the woman laughed too.

The dragon swung her head, opened her beak, and hissed over stained, near-useless teeth, tiny on mottled bone.

The girl stepped on a mossy rock. "Who are you?"

"Norema the tale-teller," the woman said. She put both hands in the pockets of her leggings and took a long step across the burnt-out fireplace. "Who are you?"

"I am pryn the . . . adventurer, pryn the warrior, pryn the thief!" said pryn, who had never stolen anything in her life other than a ground oaten cake from the lip of her cousin's baking oven three weeks before.

"You're going to have trouble getting that dragon to take off again."

The girl's face moved from left-over laugh to scowl. "Don't I know it!"

The ox took another step. The cart's plank wheels made brief noise among themselves and on

small stones. The ox blinked at the dragon, which stood now, one foreclaw raised.

Dragons sometimes stood like that a long time.

"You're not one of the regular dragon grooms—the little girls—they keep in the corrals above Ellamon. . . ?"

The ox tore up more rockweed.

The girl shook her head. "But I live in Ellamon—just outside Ellamon, actually. With my great aunt. I've seen them, though, flying their dragons with their trainers and guards for the tourists who go out to the hill to watch. They're all bad girls, you know. Girls who've struck their mothers or disobeyed their fathers, stolen things, sometimes even killed people. They've been brought from all over Nevèryon—"

". . . adventurers, warriors," Norema suggested, "thieves?"

The girl looked at the ground, turning her bare foot on sand. "You're a foreigner. You probably don't know much about dragons, or the bad girls who ride them."

"Oh," Norema said, "one hears fables. Also I've been through this strange and . . . well, this strange land before. What were you doing on that dragon?"

"Flying," pryn answered, then wondered if that sounded disingenuous. She bent to brush a dusty hand against a dusty knee.

"It's something I've always wanted to do. And I'm growing—everyone always tells me how much I'm growing. So I thought: soon I shall be too tall or too fat. I'd better do it now. The girls they use for riders up in the dragon corrals are all half-starved anyway, till they're thin as twigs. They're all twelve and thirteen years old—forever, it seems like." She smoothed her overblouse down her waistless stomach. "I'm short. But I'm not thin."

"True," Norema said, "you're not. But you look strong. And I like your laugh."

"I don't know how strong I am either," pryn said, "but I caught a wild dragon, bridled her, and led her to a ledge."

"That seems strong enough."

"You've been here before?" It sounded more suspicious than pryn meant. But suspicion was more a habit of tongue picked up from her aunt than a habit of mind; and, anyway, her laugh belied it. "What are you doing here now?"

"Looking for a friend," Norema said. "A friend of mine. Years ago she used to be a guard at the dragon corrals and told me all about those . . . bad girls. My friend wore blue stones in her hair and a black rag mask across her eyes; and she killed with a double-bladed sword. We were companions and traveled together several years."

"What happened to her?" pryn asked.

"Oh," Norema said. "I told her tales—long, marvelous, fascinating tales. Sometimes I wasn't sure if they were tales told to me when I was a child, or tales I'd made up. I told her tales, and after a while my masked friend grew more interested in the tales than she was in me. One night, sitting on her side of the campfire, cleaning her double blade, she told me she was going off the next morning to see if one particular tale were true. Next day when I woke, she and her bedroll were gone—along with her double-bladed sword. Nor was I worried. We were the kind of friends who frequently went separate ways—for days, even weeks. But weeks became months; and I did not run across my friend's campfire on the rim of the Menyat canyon, nor did I hear any word of her tramping along the northernmost Faltha escarpments, nor did I meet her taking shade in one of the Makalata caves at the rim of the western desert."

Squatting, pryn picked up a dry stick. "So what did you do?" She scratched at spilled ash.

"I decided to take my cart and go look for her. I've looked many places, and no doubt I'll look many more. But I've come to Ellamon because my friend once worked here and was happy."

"Mmm," pryn said, suspiciously.

The woman looked down to see what pryn had been scratching. " 'Pyre,' " she read. " 'Ynn.' Pyre-ynn?"

" . . . pryn,' " pryn said. "That's my name. In writing."

The woman stepped around the figures and squatted too. "Here." She took the stick and added a line above the two syllabics the girl had etched in ash. "You, 'pryn.' *That's* your name. In writing. That line there means you squish the two sounds together into one. Otherwise you'll have people mispronouncing it every which way."

In late sunlight pryn squinted at the woman. "How do *you* know?"

"Actually—" The woman looked back at pryn with a moment's uncertainty—"because I invented it."

The girl frowned. "Invented what?"

"Writing. A long time ago. I must have been about your age — now I don't mean I invented *every* kind of writing. I just added the idea of making written signs stand for particular words, so you could *say* them. Till then, you know, written signs stood for animals, foods, amounts, tasks, instructions, ideas, even people, even *kinds* of people—whole complexes of notions. But written *words*—that's *my* innovation."

"You did that?" The girl blinked.

The woman nodded. "When

I was a girl. I lived on an island—that's where I invented my system. I taught it to my island friends, many of whom were fishers and sailors. Years later, when I came to Nevèryon, I found my writing system had preceded me. With changes, of course. But most of the signs were quite recognizably the ones I had made up when I was a child."

"Everyone says this kind of writing came across the sea from the Ulvayns." Looking at the tall, middle-aged woman, pryn thought of her own short, bitter aunt. "You invented . . . my name?"

"Only the way to write it. Believe me, it comes in very handy if you're a tale teller. But you know—" The woman was apparently not as comfortable squatting as pryn, so she put one leather legging's knee on the ground. She scratched the name again, this time above what pryn had written. "—I've made some changes in my system. About names, for instance. Today I always write the first sign for a name with a slightly larger version of the initial sign; and I put a little squiggle down under it, like that—" She added another scratch. "That way, if I'm reading it aloud, I can always glance ahead and see a name coming."

The girl looked down at her name's new version, below and above the old one she herself had glyphed.

"Really, it's quite useful," Norema went on. "My friend, for example, was called Raven. Now there are ravens that caw and fly—much more efficiently than dragons. And there's my friend, Raven. Since she left, I find that now, more and more often, *both* will enter my stories. The distinction makes a certain convenience, a sort of stability. Besides, I like distinguishing people from things in and of the land. It makes tale telling make a lot more sense."

The girl grinned at the woman. "I like that!" She took the stick and traced the syllabics, first the larger with the mark beneath, then the smaller, and last the eliding diacritic.

She read it.

Then Pryn laughed again.

It was much the same laugh she had laughed when she'd dismounted; but it sounded richer—to Pryn, at any rate. Indeed, it sounded almost as rich and wild to Pryn, this time, as it had before to Norema—*almost* as though the mountain, with its foaming falls and piled needles and scattered shale-chips (all named 'Pryn' by the signs now inscribed thrice on its ashy surface, twice with capitals, enclosing the minuscule version), had itself laughed.

And that *is* my name, Pryn thought. "What tales did you tell?"

"Would you like to hear one?"

"Yes," Pryn said.

Norema, who had taken the stick, stood, stepped from the fireplace, turned her back, and lowered her head, as though listening to leaves and dragon's breath and her ox's chewing and some stream's plashing just beyond the brush, as though they all were whispering to the tale-teller the story she was about to tell. Pryn listened too. Then Norema turned and announced, "Once upon a time . . ." or its equivalent in that distant, long-ago language. And Pryn jumped: the words interrupted that unheard flow of natural speech as sharply as a written sign found on a stretch of dust till then marred only by wind and rolling pebbles.

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful young queen—just about your age. Your height, too. And your size."

"People say I'm clever, that I'm young, and that I'm growing," Pryn said. "They *don't* say I'm beautiful."

"At this *particular* time," Norema explained, "young queens who looked like you were all thought to be ravishing. Standards of beauty change. And this happened many years back. Once upon—"

"Was your friend my age?"

Norema chuckled. "No. She was closer to *my* age. But it's part of the story, you see, to say the queen was the age of the hearer. Believe me, I told it the same way to my friend."



"Oh."

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful queen, about your age and your size. Her name was Olin, and she was queen of all Nevèryon—at least she was supposed to be. Her empire extended from the desert to the mountains, from the jungles to the sea. Unfortunately, however, she had an unhappy childhood. Some evil priests shut Olin, her family, and her twenty-three servants in an old monastery on the Garth peninsula, practically from the time she was born until she was, well . . ." The woman questioned Pryn with narrowed eyes. "Fifteen?"

Pryn nodded.

"When she was fifteen years old, for arcane political reasons, the evil priests decided to kill her outright. But they were afraid to do it themselves—for more political reasons equally arcane. They couldn't get any of her family to do it, so they tried to hire her own servants, one after the other, all twenty-three. But the first servant was the queen's nurse, an old woman who loved the girl and came to her young mistress and told her what the priests intended.

" 'What shall I do?' the queen cried.

" 'You can be afraid,' said the old servant. 'But don't be terrified. That's first. You see, I have a plan, though it's a sad and sorrowful one. I've made a bargain

with the priests, which they'll respect because they think me a great magician. I've told them I will betray you if they will pay me one gold piece. And I have also made them promise that if I fail, they will hire the next servant to do the same deed for *two* gold pieces—twice what they have paid me. And if that servant fails, they will hire the next one to do the deed for four gold pieces, twice again the amount paid the former. And if he fails, the next will be hired for twice the amount paid to the previous one. And so on.' The old woman produced from the folds of her gown a single gold coin—and a knife. 'Take my pay and hide it. Then take this knife—and strike me in the heart! For only my death will corroborate my failure.'

" 'Kill you?' demanded the queen.

" 'It's the only way.'

"The queen wept and cried and protested. 'You are my beloved friend, my faithful bonds-woman, and my dear nurse as well. You are closer to me than my own mother!' But the old woman put her arms around the girl and stroked her hair. 'Let me explain some of the more arcane politics behind this whole nasty business. These are brutal and barbaric times, and it is either you or me—for even if I *do* kill you, the wicked priests plan to dispense with me as soon as I stab you. They cannot

suffer the murderer of a queen to live, even the murderer of a queen they hate as much as they hate you. If you do what I say, you will have the gold coin as well as your life, whereas I shall lose *my* life in any case.'

"And so, after more along the same line, the queen took the coin, and the knife—which she thrust into her old nurse's heart.

"Not so many days later, a second servant came to Queen Olin. 'Here are two gold coins and a rope with which I am to garrote you. Take the coins and hide them; then take the rope and strangle me—if you yourself would live. For *my* life is over in any case.' Again the young queen protested, but again the servant prevailed. The young queen took the rope and strangled him. A few days later a third servant came with four gold pieces and a great rock to smash in the queen's head. After that a fourth came with eight gold pieces and a draught of corrosive poison. The fifth had sixteen gold pieces. The sixth had thirty-two coins. The next—"

Pryn suddenly laughed. "But I've heard this story before! Or one just like it—only it was about grains of sand piled on the squares of a gaming board. I don't remember how many squares there were, but by the end, I remember, all the sand in the world was used up. Am I right about the outcome? At the end of the twenty-three serv-

ants, she had all the money in the world. . . ?"

Norema smiled. "She certainly had all the money in the monastery. And at that particular time, all the money in the monastery was pretty much all the money in Nevèrjôn."

"That is an old story. I know, because I've heard it before. The version about the sand grains, that is."

"That part of the story is old. But there are some new parts too. For example, after she had killed all her servants, the beautiful young queen felt very differently about herself."

Pryn frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Well," Norema said, "for one thing, in less than a year she had stabbed, strangled, bashed out the brain, poisoned, beheaded, and done even worse to twenty-two of her most faithful bondsmen and bondswomen, who were also the closest things she'd had to friends. After that she began to act quite strangely and behave very oddly. On and off, she behaved oddly the rest of her life—even for a queen, and in those days queens were expected to be eccentric. Often, after that, she was known as Mad Olin."

"I thought you said there were twenty-three servants."

"There were. But the last survived. He was not only a servant, but also her maternal

uncle—though, alas, I can't remember his family name. And there're reasons to remember it; but for the life of me I can't recall what they are. Anyway. Years before, he had fallen on bad times and had indentured himself to the queen's mother, which was why he was with Olin in the first place. But he had always set himself apart. Along about the violent deaths of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first servants—all particularly gruesome—the evil priests were, financially speaking, in rather bad shape. Olin was by then quite well off—though mentally she was a bit shaky. Her maternal uncle, who, like the first servant, was also something of a magician, had, with the help of the rest of the family, managed to engineer an escape for the queen. It took a good deal of the money; and Olin took the rest—to hide lest the wicked priests manage to trick it back, even as her first wise and faithful servant had tricked it from them." Norema sighed. "Raven and I once visited that monastery—it's still there today. And there are still priests—at least there were when we went. Now, I'm not sure. Anyway, you could certainly tell that the place had seen better times. Clearly they hadn't gotten their money back."

"Are the priests still wicked?"

Reddish brows lowered. "Well, I doubt either my friend

or I would ever stop there again—unless we absolutely had to."

"What about Olin's escape?"

"Ah, the exciting part!" Norema said. "Her uncle spirited her away from the monastery in the middle of the night, with the money in a caravan of six great wagons, each pulled by six horses apiece. It was a lot of money, you see, and took more than one wagon to carry. Also, there was a lot more than gold coins in it by now—jewels and iron trinkets and all sorts of precious and semi-precious stones. The uncle took her to his family home, there in the south, and that evening he went with her up into a tall tower and began to read her the sequence by which the gold coins had come to her: one, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, one hundred twenty-eight, two hundred fifty-six, five hundred twelve, one thousand twenty-four, two thousand forty-eight, four thousand ninety-six—"

"I see how fast it goes up!" Pryn exclaimed. "That's just halfway through them, and it's already almost five thousand gold pieces. Two more, and it'll be over twenty thousand. Twenty thousand gold pieces must be close to all the money in the world!"

"That's what *you* see." Norema smiled. "What the young queen saw, however, was a city."

Pryn blinked.

Norema said: "The queen blinked."

"What city?" Pryn asked. "Where did she see it?"

"Precisely what the queen wondered too—for she blinked again... It was gone! Through the stone columns at the stone rail, the queen looked down from the tower and saw only some marshy water, an open inlet, rippling out between the hills to the sea. But the queen *had* seen a city, there among the ripples, as clearly as she now saw the hills either side of the inlet, or, indeed, as clearly as she saw the swampy growths that splotched the waters where they came into land. When she told her uncle what she had seen, immediately he stopped reading the numbers and showed her all sorts of magic wonders, including a circle full of different stars, which he gave her to keep. Then he took her down from the tower to a great dinner that had been prepared for her, where they talked of more magic things. Then he did something terrible."

"What?" Pryn asked. "So far, this story sounds more confusing than exciting."

"To the proper hearer," Norema said, "precisely what seems confusing will be the exciting part. When the queen came back from a stroll in the garden between courses, the uncle gave her a goblet of poison, which she, unknowing, drank."

Norema was silent for a long time.

Pryn finally asked: "Was that the end of the queen? I'm sure her uncle probably wanted the money for himself. This doesn't sound like a real story to me. What about the 'circle of different stars'? I don't even know what that is! I mean, it doesn't seem like a *story* because it . . . doesn't really end."

"It certainly doesn't end there," Norema said. "It goes on for quite a while, yet. But that always seemed to me an exciting place for a pause."

"What *did* happen, then?"

"See, you *are* caught up in the excitement, the action, the suspense! You want to know the outcome—I think it's very important to alert your listeners to the progress of their own reactions. I can foresee a time, after lots more tales have been told, when that won't be necessary. But for now it's a must. Well, the poison *didn't* kill the queen. It put her in a trance—and when she woke, if indeed she wasn't dreaming, she was on a rocky ledge. It was night, and as she pushed herself up on her hands and looked around, she saw she was lying between two white stones, one taller than the other—

"The remaining money was in huge piles beside the queen, in heaps and bags and bundles, and the circle of different stars lay on the rock at her knee.

Down the ledge from her, the water was covered with fog. The moon looked ghastly, a yellow disk hanging over a fuming inlet. Water flickered beneath mists. Olin sat on the rock, hugging her knees in the chill light, her chin on her kneecaps, biting her inner lip. A bird woke up and screeched! The queen looked to see green wings starting from the branches of a pecan tree. She got to her feet unsteadily, still groggy from the poison. She stood on the ledge and cried out across the waters, just as if someone had told her what to say: 'I am Olin, and I have come to warn the Worm of the Sea of the Northern Eagle's evil gaze!' Then she took a step back and put her wrist up to her mouth as if she were afraid she had said something blasphemous. She stepped to the ledge's edge again and looked down toward the foggy water. The mists were a-boil and now and again splashes geysered hot silver.

"There was a rumbling, as of some vast engine, not only from the water, but from the ground. Trees trembled; small stones shook loose to roll down into fog.

"Water surged, now into the land, now away. At each surge away, water lowered.

"Olin saw the first broken building tops cleave mist and waves—three towers, a bridge between, dripping. Waves broke higher than fog; foam fell back,

roaring, to the sea. More buildings emerged. Water poured from their roofs. Through fog, water erupted from stone windows. Fog rolled and roiled off. Green and white water lapped away through mud and weeds and clotted alleys. Water rushed from a street where pillars still stood. Water carried weed and mud from patterned blue flags; other pillars were broken. One lay across its square pediment. At the same time she saw the cleared street, she saw other avenues still silted, dark, wet. Shapes that might have been buildings were mounded over, glistening black and green. To the earth's rumblings and the water's ragings, the city rose.

"The young queen, half running, half falling down the slope, only just managed to get her feet under her—when they plunged shin-deep in mud. She staggered on, arms flailing, till she reached the first cracked paving—nowhere near as clean as it had looked from the ledge. Mud clung to the walls beside her. Weeds in windows hung down dripping stones. Fallen masonry, scattered shells, and soaked branches made her progress by the carved pillars almost as slow as it had been in the mud. Dirty-footed, wet-handed, scratches on her shoulders and legs, the young queen pushed between stones and driftwood, making her way between the broken walls, their carvings veiled in sea-moss.

"What movement down what alley made her stop, the queen was never sure. Off in the wet green which filled another street, something flexed, shifted, slid. The building beside her was heaped over with wrinkled mud. That mud moved too, quivered, rose—not mud at all; but some immense tarpaulin. The sheet shook itself loose.

"Olin looked up.

"The moon lit yellow fogs that shifted over roofs. Through them, over them, a wing rose—not a soft, feathered, birdlike wing, but a taut, spined, reptilian wing, sheer enough to let moonlight through its skin, here and there darkened by spine or vein.

"That wing blotted a fifth of the sky!

"Wind touched the queen's cheek, her wrist. A second wing, as huge, rose from where it had lain over buildings at the street's far side. Ahead, beyond the pillars, something slid forward, pulled back.

"To the extent she had seen it at all, she'd thought it was a toppled carving, a sculpted demon's head, big as a house and fallen on its chin. A gold and black eye opened; and opened; and opened, wider than the wide moon. Then, perhaps fifteen feet away, from under a rising lid, the other eye appeared. A lip lifted from teeth longer and thicker than the queen's legs. The head, still

wet, rose on its thick neck, clearing the near roofs, rising over the towers, spiring between the wings.

"The dragon—a giant dragon, a sea dragon many times the size of her mountain cousins—was coiled through the streets. She'd slept with the city beneath the water. But now as the city rose, the dragon rose above it, to stare down at the young queen with black and gold eyes.

"Again Olin cried out, loud enough to hurt her throat: 'Oh great Gauine—' for that was the dragon's name, though I don't know where she learned it— 'I have come to hide my treasure with you and warn you of the Eagle's antics—' "

Squinting silvery eyes in the sun, the ordinary mountain dragon put her foot down and hissed at the ox; the ox shied, backing up five steps. The cart trundled and creaked. Norema turned to grab it.

Pryn pushed up to her feet and snatch at the dragon's swinging reins. Green wings flapped futilely.

Norema calmed her ox. Pryn led her dragon to a tree and lashed it. Norema came over to give her a hand, then walked with Pryn back to the fireplace. Pryn rubbed her hands together. Her palms were sore from where the reins, first in landing, then in tethering, had jerked through. "The story you were telling?" Pryn asked. "What happened next?"

"Not much," Norema said. "Using the magic circle of different stars as a guide, Olin and Gauine hid the money in the city. Then Gauine settled down on top of it to guard it—just in time, too. For water began to roll back through the streets. Once more the city began to sink. The queen clambered up the slope, to the ledge and barely managed to escape drowning. And the moon was down."

Pryn frowned.

"Oh, Gauine was a very exceptional dragon," Norema explained.

They stopped by the cart; the ox nipped more weed.

"But then, if she hadn't been," Norema went on, "I doubt the queen would have entrusted the treasure into her keeping. The next day, wandering half-dazed along the beach, Olin was found by some travelling mummers. Fortunately, over the night she'd been gone, the rest of her relatives had managed to defeat the evil priests. The young queen was taken to Kolhari, capital of all Nevèryon, where she was crowned queen for real. From all reports, she was never popular and led a horrid life. She went through several kings and a number of children, most of whom ended up frightfully. But she managed to make several arcane political decisions which have always been considered praiseworthy, at least by people who count such things important."

"Queen Olin," Pryn mused. "I've heard other stories about her, here in Ellamon. She was the queen who set up the dragon corrals and decided that bad little girls would be condemned to work there."

"One of the more interesting fables," Norema said. "Well, she was always fond of the animal, since it was a giant sea dragon who guarded the sunken treasure on which her power rested."

"That was the story your friend set out to find was true or not?"

Norema nodded.

"She wanted to find Mad Queen Olin's treasure in the sunken city guarded by the dragon Gauine?"

"That's what she said."

Suddenly Pryn turned around and looked off at her own winged mount swaying at its tree. "Brainless, stupid beast! I thought I'd fly you away from home to excitement and adventure—or at least to a ledge from which I could return. But here—" she turned back to Norema—"she has landed in this silly clearing and can't take off again!"

"You want to leave home for good," Norema said seriously.

"Yes," Pryn said. "And don't tell me not to!"

"You aren't afraid of slavers?"

Pryn shook her head. "You're traveling alone, and you're still a free woman."

"True," Norema said. "And I intend to stay one." She con-

sidered a moment. "Let me give you two more gifts—besides my tale."

Pryn looked perplexed; she hadn't thought much of the story; it had stopped and started, leaving her anxious and expecting precisely where she wanted answers and explanations.

"You can be frightened," Norema said. "But don't be terrified. That's first."

"I'm *not* terrified," Pryn said.

"I know," Norema said. "But that's the way with advice. The part you can accept you almost always already know."

"I'm not afraid either," Pryn said. Then she frowned again. "No, I *am* afraid. But it doesn't matter, because I made my mind up to it a long time ago."

"Good." Norema smiled. "I wasn't going to argue. One of my gifts, then, is a packet of food, that I'll give you out of my provisions cart. The other is some geographical information about the real world over which you've just so cavalierly flown—both are things one cannot trust tales to provide. Oh, yes, and another piece of advice too: Untie your dragon and let her wander into the mountains where she belongs. Left to herself she'll find the ledges she needs, as you must too—but you can't be tied down with dragons that won't fly where you want to go, no matter how much fun the notion of flight. Through those trees, maybe a

hundred yards on, you'll find the junction of two roads, giving you a choice of four directions.

The one going—"Norema glanced at the sun—"towards the sunset will take you, with three days' walk, to a white desert with dangerous tribes who sew copper wire up the rims of their ears. Take the road leading in the opposite direction, down between the mountain hills, and with four days' walk you'll reach the coast and a brave little village of rough-handed men and women who live from the sea. Take the road running to your right as you approach the crossroads, and you'll be back at El-lamon in no more than three hours. Take the path that runs away from the junction to your left, and seven days' hike will bring you to the grand port of Kolhari, capital city of all Nevèrÿon—like my story." Norema smiled. (That so famous city had not played much of a part in the tale, Pryn thought; though certainly she knew enough of Kolhari by other reports.) "Along with my tale, I think my gifts should stand a young woman like you, off to see the world, in good stead."

"Thank you," Pryn said, because her aunt, for all her bitterness, had taught her to be polite.

Some hours later, when Pryn was several miles along her chosen route, she stopped a minute. Of all the day's marvels it



was neither her own flight, nor the tale of the dragon and the sunken city, nor the food pack tied on her back—with twisted vines—that held her thoughts. She picked up a stick from the highway's shoulder and scratched her name in its dust, new capital and eliding mark. She put the stick down. Again she read over her name, that seemed so new and wondrous and right.

Then she walked on.

An hour later a dead branch, blown out on the road by a mountain gust, obscured it beyond reading.

## 2. OF ROADS, REAL CITIES, STREETS, AND STRANGERS

This is how, after seven nights' unchanging stars, eclipsed only by passing clouds or moon glare, Pryn came to be standing on a roadway atop a hill one dark dawn, looking down at port Kolhari.

Fog lay on the city, obscuring detail. But that hulking edifice to the west had to be the High Court of Eagles. East, regular roofs suggested some wide street between—Black Avenue, perhaps, or even New Pavê. She'd heard travelers in the Ellamon market talk of these wonderful ways—

The sea—!

Pryn had been looking at the city itself at least that long before the foggy vastness beyond it closed with its rightful name. It *had* to be the sea! A mountain girl, she'd never seen so much water. Well, it was quite as impressive as she heard it was. At the shore, like pine needles sticking up through the fog, she saw what must be ships' masts along the famous Kolhari waterfront. Nearer, roofs of sizable houses sat apart from one another — perhaps the wealthy merchants' homes in the suburb of Sallese or maybe the houses of the hereditary nobles of Nev-eryóna. My fortune, Pryn thought, may hide down there. A memory of her great aunt returned: the old woman wrung her hands. "If your father could only see you . . ." Pryn's father had died when Pryn was a baby. Still, as a child, Pryn had kept some faint fancy of finding that vanished phantom of a parent. Down there? She answered her own question, as she had many times before, now on a solitary dawn walk through sunny mountain pines, now standing at evening on some shaley scarp, now at a bright trout pool spilling through the noon sun between high, hot rocks: No. One thing about riding dragons, she reflected, was that such childish expectation could be, in the momentary wonder of flight, forgotten—not put aside by active effort. Pryn did not hear the

hoofbeats till they were almost on her. (Three times over the week, she'd hidden in the bushes while mounted men in leather aprons herded dusty men and women along the road rut, chained collar to collar. She'd seen slaves chained to planks outside the walls of Ellamon, six or ten together, waiting to be fed. She'd seen slaves, two or three, chained in the sunny corner of the dusty Ellamon market, under the eyes of an overseer, waiting to be bought.) She whirled about, then dashed for the road's edge; but she had seen the riders—which meant they had seen her!

The three horses hammered abreast of her, halted.

The tallest and, from his reddish beard and open face, youngest rider grinned. Some teeth were missing. "What are you looking at, girl?"

Pryn recovered from her crouch, thigh deep in bramble. "Are you slavers?" In asking, she realized they were not.

Another rider, a weathered man, squat, muscular, and hairy-shouldered, threw back his head, laughing. His teeth, the ones visible, were large, yellow, and sound.

The third was naked, save a cloth, strapped and buckled about his forehead, that hung to his shoulders. "Do we look like slavers?" His voice was rough enough to suggest a throat injury. And on the right side of

his body, Pryn saw as his horse wheeled and wheeled back over the road, long scars roped him, chest, flank, shoulder, and thigh, as though someone had flung blacksnakes against him that had stuck. "Do we look like slavers, girl?"

Pryn shook her head.

"Slavers!" The youngster laughed. Despite his height, Pryn was sure he was not a year older than she. "Us, slavers? Do you know Gorgik the Liberator? We're going to join him and his men at—" He stopped, because the other two grimaced. The squat one made a half-finished motion for silence. The youngster leaned forward, more soberly. "You want to know if we're slavers? Well, we have a question for you: Are you one of the Child Empress's spies, in the pay of the High Court of Eagles?"

Once more Pryn shook her head.

"That's what *you* say." The youngster lowered his voice. "But how do *we* know?" His gappy grin remained. "The Liberator isn't the most popular man in Nevèrÿon. The Empress's spies are cunning and conniving."

Pryn stepped onto the road. "You know I'm not a spy the same way I know you're not slavers." What she was thinking was that they might be bandits; she did not want to act afraid. "You don't look like slavers. I don't look like a spy."

The youngster leaned even lower, till he looked at her right between his mount's red ears. "While you and I both may very well have seen slavers, and so know what slavers look like, what if we here have never *seen* a spy. . . ?"

Pryn frowned. She had never seen a spy either.

The squat one said: "Spies often look like other than spies. It's one sign by which you know them." He moved thick fingers back and forth in the graphite grey mane.

The naked one with the ragged headdress and the scars said: "This road runs from the Faltha mountains to port Kolhari. Which way do you go?"

"There." Pryn pointed toward the city.

"Good," the naked rider said. "Come up on my horse. We'll take you into town."

Again Pryn shook her head. "I can get there by myself."

The scarred rider pulled a four-foot lance from a holder on his horse's flank. "If you don't come with us," he said evenly, "we'll kill you. Make your choice, spy."

Pryn thought of bolting from them, thought of running between them, and stood.

The naked rider held his lance with his elbow against his scarred side so that his forearm was at a right angle to his body. The metal lancehead showed the hammer marks of its forging.

"Our friend here—" he jerked his rag-covered head toward the bearded boy—"has said more than he should have. You're going into the city anyway. Ride with us. You *may* be a spy. We can't take chances."

Pryn walked across the road toward his horse. "You don't give me *much* of a choice."

The scarred man said: "Sit in front of me."

Angry and frightened, Pryn reached up to grapple the horse's hard neck. The naked man bent. He shoved his lance back into its holder and slid his hand under Pryn's raised thigh to tug her up, while she got one leg awkwardly before his belly. Pryn's capitulation made her anger more acute. "Since I'm being punished for what your young friend knows and almost said, at least let me know what it is. Who is this Liberator—and take your hand off my breast!" She pushed the rider's hand from where dark fingers had moved.

The squat rider laughed. "You want to know about Gorgik? Once he was a slave; now he's vowed to end all slavery throughout Nevèryon. Some say that someday, if not soon, he may be emperor! Myself, I knew him years ago when he was an officer in the Child Empress's army. One of the best, too." The squat man rubbed a wide, studded belt bound high on his hairy ribs. "I fought under him—but

only for a month. Then they broke up our division and sent me off with another captain. But we're going to fight under him again—if he'll have us. Hey, boys?"

"Aye!" came from the one boy beside her. The naked man behind her put his hand, lightly, back on Pryn's stomach.

"Only with him a month, yes." The squat rider grew pensive. "He won't remember me. But we loved that man, we did—every one of us under him. And slavery is an evil I know first hand." He laughed again and guided his horse around a branch fallen to the road. Hooves smashed leaves. "That's why the three of us go to—"

"Move your hand!" Pryn shoved the naked rider's arm away. Hoisting herself forward, she glared over her shoulder. "I don't want this ride! I'm not here to play dumb games. Cut it out!"

"Look, girl," the naked rider said from the rags that hung about his dark, smooth face. "You sit behind me. That way, you can—"

"—she can put *her* hands where she wants!" cried the bearded youth. He and the squat one both settled into the big grins of stupid boys.

Pryn decided that, of the three, the youngster *was* the fool. Till then she'd vaguely thought that, since he was closest to her age, he might be the easiest to enlist

for help. But he talked too much and was probably too intimidated by the older two anyway.

The horse trotted.

The ragged, flapping head-dress smelled of sweat and animals. Pryn leaned to the side to see ahead, but that was mostly trees now, with the road's ruts descending among them. Gripping the horse's flanks with her knees and the rider's with her hands, she settled into the motion.

Once she thought: A beautiful young queen, abducted on the road by three fearsome, romantic bandits . . . But they were not romantic. She was not beautiful. No, this was not the time for tale-teller's stuff. It was all a bit scary. But as yet, she reflected, I'm *not* terrified. From the threat of death to the straying hand, it all had too much of the air of some half-hearted obligation.

The change from country to city Pryn never quite understood. Now there was a river by the road. The horses' hoofbeats had changed timbre. She looked down—yes, the road itself along which they trotted was now paved with large, flat stones set in hard mud. She looked up to see green-tiled decorations, interspersed with terra cotta castings, on some upper cornice of a wealthy home beyond a stone wall lapped with vines. On the other side of the road, she saw

an even larger house, behind a higher wall, moving up toward them as the other fell behind.

Ahead, armed men stood before a gate in a wall. Above, Pryn saw the upper floor of another house. Much of the decorative tiling had fallen away. Behind the crenellations, half a dozen men ambled on the roof, some with spears, some with bows. At a corner, one sat on a cracked carving, looking down into the yard.

Pryn's rider, the younger and older at either side, drew up to the wooden door in the heavy stones. The wall was half again as high as the youngster on his horse.

The squat rider bawled out in a voice much too loud simply to be speaking to the men in leather helmets, either side of the gate, with their broad knives hanging at their hips: "Go in and tell your master, the Liberator Gorgik, that three brave fellows have come to pledge hands and hearts to whatever end he would put them!"

One, with the pale eyes and frizzy beard of a barbarian—still rare enough in northern Ellamon to cause comments when you saw one walking in the market—stepped up to within five feet of them, pushed up his helmet, and bawled back: "And what names might he know you by?"

"Tell your great and gracious master, Gorgik, that the South-

ern Fox—" he gestured toward Pryn's rider—"and the Red Badger—" which was, apparently, the bearded boy—"and myself, the Western Wolf—" the thick hand fell against his own black rug of a chest—"have come to serve him! Ask him what he knows of us and whether the tales of our exploits that have preceded us are sufficiently impressive to allow us to join his company! Let him consider! We shall return in a few hours to seek admittance!"

The barbarian guard nodded toward Pryn, then said in a perfectly ordinary voice: "There're four of you. . . ."

In an equally ordinary voice the Western Wolf said: "Oh, I forgot the kid." He turned back to the gate, took a breath, and bawled: "Tell him that the Blue Heron is also among our number, and to consider her for his cause!"

Then Wolf, Badger, and Fox, with the Heron behind (thinking of Raven and capital signs) wheeled from the gate.

What Pryn thought, as the great houses drifted by her behind high walls and palm clusters, was: Here, I am suddenly in this world of men, made to ride when I want to hide, touched when I want to be left alone, and given a new name when I've just learned to write my old one, all under some fanciful threat of death because I *might* be a spy. I don't like it at all, she thought. I don't like it.

As unclear as the shift from country to city had been, Pryn was equally uncertain where the change came between suburb and center. But when the horses clattered across a paved and populous avenue to splash into a muddy alley of stone houses with thatched shacks between them, she realized it had come.

They crossed another street.

Down another alley, water flashed between distant masts.

They turned onto another avenue. Noise and confusion dazzled her. Living on the edge of a mountain town without ever really considering herself part of it, Pryn had known the gossipings, prejudices, and rigidities of town life that played through Ellamon's quiet streets. But here, the hustle and hallooing made her wonder: How, here, could anyone *know* anyone?

Twice in one block the Fox's horse danced aside to avoid someone, first when a woman dashed from the crowds at one side of the street, a four-foot basket strapped to her back, to plunge into the crowds on the other; second, to avoid three youngsters chasing ahead after a black ball. Pryn clung to the Fox's twisting back.

An elderly woman left the corner, deep in conversation with a younger who wore a red scarf for a sash. A man and a woman servant behind held decorated parasols over them—or tried to. The edge of

sunlight kept slipping back and forth across the older woman's elaborate white coif and silver combs. Now she pushed bracelets and blue sleeves up her arms and turned to another woman, with short hair pale as goat's cream. This woman wore leather straps across her bare shoulders; a strap ran down between her abrupt, small breasts. She carried several knives at her belt and walked the hot stones barefoot. Another woman servant, Pryn saw, had despaired of shading the pale-haired, sunken-eyed creature. (Was she eighteen. . . ?) The tow-headed young woman with the straps stepped away here, then off there, now looking into a basket of nuts some porter carried by her, now turning to answer the elderly woman with the silver combs. The servant, a woman at least forty, frowned at her and let the parasol shaft fall back on her own shoulder.

Pryn had assumed Fox, Badger, and Wolf had seen them too—but the horses, grown skittish at the traffic, must have distracted them. And the women's course veered closer than even Pryn had thought.

One of the servants gave a small shriek.

The horses reared.

The white-haired woman turned in startled anger. She stepped back, hands down in blowing blue. The woman with the red scarf at her waist took

the elderly woman's shoulder and gave a protesting wordless shout of her own. Servants scrambled. One dropped a parasol. The man-servant was shouting: "Country ruffians! What's wrong with you! Out of the street, now! Out of the street! Don't you know enough to let a woman of Madame Keyne's standing in this city have the right of way? Rein your horses back! Rein them, I say—" The Fox's horse started to rear again, but jarred, stopping.

Pryn felt it, ankle to jaw. It was as if a dragon in airborne career had suddenly smashed rock. What had happened was that the small, pale-haired woman had grasped the horse's bridle and, with a jerk, brought the beast up short.

The little woman's gray, sunken eyes were sudden centers where lines of effort and anger met. The horse jerked against her grip three times, then stilled. "Stupid—" the woman got out between tight teeth. The angry eyes swept up by the Fox to meet Pryn's. The horse quivered between Pryn's legs. Under Pryn's hands, the Fox's scarred shoulder flexed and flexed as he tried to rein his animal from her.

Suddenly the little woman released the bridle and stalked off after the others, who had collected themselves to hurry on, again deep in their conversation. Servants hurried behind them, parasols waving.

The horses moved about one another. Fox, Badger, and Wolf were all cursing: the women, the city, the sun above them, the people around them. Swaying at the Fox's back, Pryn tried to look after the vanishing party. Now and again, across the crowd, she thought she caught sight of the tow-headed woman at the back of the entourage, off in some alley with sea at its end. . . .

"Get down!"

Pryn looked back at the dirty headdress, the scarred shoulder right, the unscarred shoulder left.

"Go on, girl!" the Fox demanded; the horse stilled. "We brought you to the city, where you wanted to go. Get down now! Be on your way!"

Confused, Pryn slid her foot back, up, and over, then dropped to the cobbles on the sore and tingling legs of a novice rider—dragons notwithstanding. She stepped back from the moving flanks, looking up.

The three above her, on their stepping horses, looked down.

The Badger, with his red beard, seemed about to ask something; and Pryn found her own lips halting on a question: What of the Blue Heron and the Liberator? Despite her anger, her impressment had at least provided a form for her arrival. Aside from roving fingers, she'd believed their high-sounding purpose. But as she ducked

back (someone else was shouting for them to move), she realized they were, the three of them, country men, as confused and discommoded by this urban hubbub as she was.

"Are you going to kill her now?" the Badger blurted, looking upset.

"She's no spy!" The Western Wolf leaned forward disgustingly to pat his horse's neck. "She's no different from you, boy—a stupid mountain kid run off from home to the city. I've a mind to turn you both loose and send you on your ways—"

Pryn had a momentary image of herself stuck in this confusion with the young dolt.

But the Fox said: "Come on, the two of you, and stop this!" He turned his horse up the street; the two turned after him.

Everyone else was walking.

To stay still in such a rush was madness.

Pryn walked—for hours. From time to time she sat: once on the steps in a doorway, once on a log bench beside a building. The tale-teller's food had been finished the previous night and the package discarded; so far she'd only thought about food (and home!) when she'd passed the back door of a bread shop whose aromatic ovens flooded the alley with the odor of toasted grain.

Eventually, Pryn found herself behind three women with the light hair of southern barbarians, their long dresses

shrugged off their shoulders and bunched down about their waists, each with one hand up to steady a dripping water jar. Two carried them on their heads; one held hers on a shoulder.

They turned in front of her into a street that sloped down from the avenue and, as the shadow from the building moved a-slant terra cotta jugs, thonged-up hair, and sunburned backs, Pryn followed.

Two turned down an alley, which, Pryn saw as she reached it, was only a shoulder-wide space between red mud walls. With the sun ahead of them, the two swaying silhouettes grew smaller and smaller.

Ahead, the remaining woman took her jar from her shoulder and pushed through the hanging hide that served for a door in a wood-walled building.

Pryn walked down the hill. Here, many cobbles were missing; some substance, dark and hard, with small stones stuck all over it, paved a dozen or so feet. A woman overtook her. Pryn turned to watch. The woman wore a dirty skirt, elaborately coifed hair, and dark paint in two wing-shapes around her eyes. It was very striking, the more so because Pryn—looking after her narrow back—had only glimpsed her face. Two boys hurried by on the other side, arms around each other's shoulders. One had shaved his head completely. Both, Pryn saw, be-



fore they too became just backs ahead of her, wore the same dark eye-paint.

Sitting on the steps leading up to another street, beggars argued loudly and incoherently.

Pryn hurried by.

On Pryn's right lay a littered yard between three cracked and yellow buildings. In the middle was a circular stone wall, waist high, long boards over its top. Pryn went up to the enclosure—it was about three meters across—and looked down through the strip of black between the weathered planks. Below, a dark head moved to blot a reflected strip of sky.

Again she turned down the street.

Buildings ended; Pryn looked across to an embankment. The entrance to the bridge had stone walls on either side. A tall woman at the corner was fastening a white, damasked collar, sewn with metallic threads and set with jewels. It was one of the decorative collar-covers house-slaves in wealthier families sometimes used to hide the ugly iron band all slaves wore by law. Having trouble with the clasp, however, the woman removed the cloth to shake it out. Her long neck was bare. She raised the collar-cover again.

The clasp caught—as halfway over the bridge someone hailed her. Along the bridge's walkway, in colorful robes and veils (many with painted eyes), young

women and men stood, leaned, talked, stared, or ambled slowly.

The woman with the collar-cover ran to grab the arm of the heavy, hairy man who'd called. He wore a helmet like the ones Pryn had seen outside the Liberator's headquarters.

Watching them stroll away, Pryn crossed to the bridge mouth. She reached the post where the woman had stood, put her hand on it, and looked over the stone rail.

Green water glimmered around moss-blotched rocks, clotted with wood, fruit rinds, broken pottery. Some barbarian children climbed out by the carved stanchion stones. . . .

"Twenty!"

"Five—"

"Nineteen!"

"Five!"

"Eighteen?"

"Five, I say!"

"Seventeen!"

"All right, eight!"

Voices behind Pryn made her look up. Coming forward through the loiterers was a portly, middle-aged man in a smart toga with red ribbon woven about the white sleeves, neck, and hem. His hand held the shoulder of a naked, green-eyed, barbarian boy, a year or so younger than Pryn. The boy was arguing in his odd, southern accent and gesticulating with one closed fist and one open hand: "You give me sixteen? I go with you and do it for six-

teen! All right? You give me sixteen, then!"

"Sixteen for a dirty weasel like you?" returned the man with a grin. "For sixteen, I should have you *and* your three brothers. I'll give you twelve!"

"You give me *fifteen*!" the barbarian said. "You want my brother? Maybe we go find him and he come too. But he don't do anything, you know? He just watch. For fifteen I go get my brother and—"

"Now what would I want with two of you!" The man laughed. "One of you is bad enough. I'll take you by yourself and *maybe* I'll give you twelve . . ."

A black man in a long skirt led a camel up over the bridge. The high humps, rocking gait, and clopping hooves made the loiterers smile. The creature had just soiled herself and suddenly decided to switch her tail—

Pryn herself flinched, though no drop struck.

But the man snatched his hand from the boy's shoulder and rubbed the flat of his palm now against his grey beard, now against his splattered shoulder, sucking his teeth and grimacing.

The young barbarian cackled. "Now who's dirty, old turd-nose!" With a disgusted wave he stalked off over the walkway.

The portly gentleman looked up from his scrubbing, saw the

boy leaving, and hurried after: "Thirteen! I'll give you thirteen, but no more!"

Which halted the boy at the stone rail. "Will you give me fourteen? You give me fourteen, and I'll . . ."

Pryn looked over at the water below. Two women, a soldier between, made their way over the rocks. Just before they went under the bridge, a disagreement started. The heftier woman, red wooden beads chained through her brown braids, kept pulling away; the soldier kept pulling her back. Pryn tried to hear their altercation, but though their heads were only fifteen feet below, she could not make it out. She leaned, she listened, wondering what she might do if one of them looked up to see their incomprehensible quarrel observed—

"What—!" came an agitated voice behind her. "You again . . ."

Pryn stood and turned, slowly so as not to look particularly interested in what might be going on—

A huge man stood directly behind her, heavily veined arms folded low on his chest. On his forearms he wore bronze gauntlets, dark with verdigris and busy with relief. On the grizzled chest hung a copper chain.

"I saw her first—not you!" the voice went on—not the giant's. "Get away and leave her, now. She's not to your taste anyway!"

Don't you think all of us around here have seen you enough to know what *you're* after?"

The giant had a scar under one eye and down one cheek. Rough hair, some salted white, had been braided into a thick, clublike braid over one ear — except half of it had come half undone; rough hair shook in the breeze.

Arms still folded, the giant turned his head a little—

"Now go on! Go on, I say! She's no good to you! The young ones *need* my guidance if they're to make a living here." The man talking so excitedly stood a few steps off, shaking a finger at the giant. "Go on, now! Why do you stay? Go!"

And Pryn thought: How handsome he is!

The young man's blue eyes, blinking between blond lashes, looked startlingly bright in his sunburned face. He wore only a loin cloth, with the thinnest blade at his chain belt. His arms were brown and lithe. "You don't need her!" he continued his complaint. "I do! Come on, now. Give her to me!" On his extended hand he wore many, many rings, two, three, or more on a finger; even two on his thumb. Stones and metal flashed in the sun, so that it took Pryn moments to see that the hands of the marvelous looking youth were themselves filthy. The skin was gritty with dirt. Below their jeweled freight, the nails, over-

long at the ends of long, long fingers, were dirty spikes, as though he'd been playing like a child down in the clotted river's sludge.

The giant, his arms still folded, turned his head a little more—

The handsome young man actually jumped. Then he scowled, spat on the flags, turned, and stalked off along the bridge, where a number of the loungers and loiterers were still laughing over the camel.

Pryn looked up as the giant turned back to her. She swallowed.

Around his tree-trunk of a neck was a hinged iron collar.

Pryn had always regarded slavers with fear. Perhaps some of that fear had spread to the notion of slaves themselves. She knew great families sometimes had them; she had seen slaves in the Ellamon market. But she had never talked to one, nor had she ever heard of anyone who had. To be standing in a strange city, facing one directly—and such a big one! It was quite as frightening as if *she* were being appraised by a slaver herself!

"What are you doing here, mountain girl?" the great slave asked in a voice which, for all its roughness, bore a strong city accent.

"Looking . . . for someone," Pryn stammered; it seemed she *must* answer something. "A friend of mine. A woman." Later she would think that it was only

after she'd started to speak that the image of the tale-teller's Raven, with her mask and her beaded hair and her double blade, leapt into her mind like a protective demon. "But she's not here, and I . . ." She looked around at the people about the bridge. "I was with some men, before; they were looking for someone called the Liberator . . . a man named Gorgik."

The big man leaned his head to the side. "Were they, now?" Shaggy brows drew down.

"They were going to keep me with them at first because they thought I was a spy. For the Empress. Then they realized how silly that was, and how difficult it would be trying to keep track of me in the city. So they turned me loose." She took a breath. "But now I don't know *where* to go!" The next thought struck the same way the memory of Raven had a moment back. "But I've ridden on a dragon! My name is Pryn—I can write it, too. I read and I've flown on a dragon's back above the Faltha mountains!"

The giant grinned. A third of one front tooth had broken off, but the rest were whole enough. "You've flown on a dragon above the Falthas, over the narrow-minded, provincial Hold of fabled Ellamon. . . ?" He unfolded gauntleted arms.

Each callused finger, Pryn saw, was thicker than three of hers bunched together. She nodded,

more because of his grin and his recognition of her home than for his judgment of it.

"And did you bring dried mountain cactus fruits to the market and try to sell them there to unwary tourists as eggs of the fabled beasts themselves, you dragon-riding scamp?" The grin softened to a smile. "You see, I have been to your town."

"Oh, no!" Pryn exclaimed. "I'd never do that!" Though she knew of girls and boys who had, she also knew it was precisely these—at least the girls—who ended up imprisoned as grooms in Ellamon's fabled corrals. "If my aunt ever heard I'd done a thing like that, she'd beat me!"

The man laughed. "Come with me, mountain girl."

"What are *you* doing here?" Pryn blurted. Talking had turned out to be easy enough; but the notion of going with the slave frightened her all over again.

The shaggy eyebrows raised. "I too was looking for . . . a friend."

Pryn found herself staring at the collar. Did slaves, she wondered, *have* friends? Did this slave want to make friends with her?

The man said: "But since I've found you instead, I'll put such friendships off for a while."

"Are you going to take me to your master?" Pryn asked.

The giant looked a little surprised. "No." Then surprise dissolved back into the scarred

smile. "No, I wasn't going to do that. I thought we might walk to the other end of the bridge. Then, if there were someplace you wanted to go, I'd take you there. After that, I'll leave."

Pryn looked down at the slave's feet: horny, dirty, cracked at the edge, barred with ligaments under tangled veins, the ankle's hock blocky beneath the bronze greave. Above bronze, calf hair curled over the chased rim. That's not a foot, Pryn thought. That's a ham someone's flung down on the street! She looked at his chest. On the copper chain hung a bronze disk the size of her palm—really it was several disks bolted one on top of the other with much cut away from the forward one, so that there were little shapes all over it with holes at their points; and some kind of etching on the disk beneath. . . . Around the rim were markings in some abstract design. She looked at his belly. It was muscular, hairy, with a lot behind it pushing muscle and hair forward. He wore five or six loose belts, a thick one and a thin one of leather, one of braided rope, one of flattened silver links, and one of ordinary chain. They slanted his hips at different angles. From one hung a wide, shaggy sheath; from another, some kind of purse; attached to another was a net of mail that went between his legs (a few links had broken) to pouch the

rougher hair and darker genital flesh there. She looked again at his face.

He had raised his hand to gnaw at a thumbnail.

Pryn thought: Is this how people have looked at him when they purchased him at some auction? Her cheeks and her knees suddenly heated.

The scarred face moved toward some question, but he dropped his hand and smiled. "Come. Let's walk."

And somehow she was walking with him along the bridge.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"In the city?" She looked up. "Since this morning."

"Do you know where you are?"

"You mean in Kolhari?"

"Do you know *where* in Kolhari you are?"

Pryn looked at the men and women loafing and leaning on the bridge rail. She shook her head.

He pointed with a thick thumb over the stone wall. "That muddy ditch there is the Khora Spur. Three-quarters of a mile up, it runs off the Big Khora. Both go down to the sea, to make this neighborhood in front of us into a triangular island in the middle of town. It's also called the Spur—the oldest, poorest section of the city. Right now it's mostly inhabited by barbarians, recently from the south. But it tends to house

whoever is poor, new, or down on luck."

"Do you and . . . and your master live there?"

The big man considered a moment. "You *might* say I do," which struck Pryn as a complex answer for a simple question. "This street here, running across the bridge, is the upper end of New Pavē. It runs back up into the commercial part of the city, crosses Black Avenue, and finally turns along the sea to become part of the Kolhari waterfront. Here, at this end, it's called Old Pavē. The bridge itself? We call it the Bridge of Lost Desire, though it had another name, officially, thirty years ago, when all of Kolhari was known as Neveryōna; but I don't remember what it was. The Bridge of Lost Desire is the older name. On it, you'll find working most of the city's—"

Ahead, a man shrieked.

Pryn looked at her companion—who hadn't looked at all.

When she looked back, though most people had only moved a step or turned by no more than a quarter, the shriek had created a center. At it, the handsome young man buried bare fingers in brown braids to shake the heavy young woman's head—a red wooden bead broke from its chain, fell to the stones, and rolled.

"What do you *mean*. . . !" the young man shouted. "I don't want to hear that from you! He

didn't give you *enough*? No, not from *you*! What do you mean! Tell me! No, I don't want to hear it . . . !" As he shook, the woman seemed intent on keeping her face blank, her arms limp, and her large feet under her.

Suddenly the young man threw her head away, stepping back. "You don't think I'll *do* anything to you? You don't?" He struck his dirty, ringed fist back against his shoulder, grinding. "Look—" He shoved his hand on past his shoulder; the beautiful features grimaced—"if I do that to myself—" Points and edges had caught the skin as though it were rough fabric, to tear an inch-and-a-half cut, from which blood ran, turning aside at his nipple to dribble down his flank—"what do you think I'll do to *you*? Look—" Turning suddenly, he struck his ringed fist on the arm of the nearest bystander, a boy whose made-up eyes widened as he backed away, blood welling through his fingers where he clutched his arm—"if I do that to *him*—and I don't even know the little faggot—what do you think I'll do to *you*!" Working himself up, dancing about, the handsome young man suddenly lunged, ringed hand open and falling toward her face—

The woman flinched.

Then something very complicated happened.

The hand stopped.

One thing making it compli-

cated was that, unlike you and me, Pryn had been watching the woman (who was about Pryn's age and Pryn's size). What had first looked like a kind of apathetic paralysis in her, Pryn saw, was actually an intense concentration, and Pryn remembered a moment when, bridling her dragon, the wings had suddenly flapped among the bushes, and for a moment she'd thought she would completely lose control of it; and all she could do was hang on as hard as possible and look as calm as possible, trying to keep her feet from being jerked off the mossy rocks; for Pryn it had worked. . . .

Another thing making it complicated was that Pryn had *not* been watching the big man she was with.

And he had not been watching the encounter.

We've spoken of a center the encounter had created. The big man's course took them within a meter of it. He had not stopped walking; and because Pryn had not been watching him, she had not stopped walking either.

As they came within the handsome young man's ken, his hand had stopped.

His head jerked about, his face for a moment truly excitingly ugly. "All right!" he demanded. "What is it, then? You want to be the Liberator of every piece of camel dung on this overground sewer?"

The woman with the beaded

hair did not look at Pryn's companion, but suddenly stalked off, arms folded across her breasts in what might have been anger, might have been embarrassment. Five other women, waiting outside the circles within circles, closed about her, one holding her shoulder, one leaping to see over the others if she were all right—as though they had not seen the men either.

The handsome young man took a step after them, then glanced at the giant, as if unsure whether he had permission to follow. Apparently he didn't, for he spat again and, making a bright fist by his hip, turned his bleeding breast away, and walked off in the other direction.

People looked away, turned away, walked away; there were three, half a dozen, a dozen, and then no centers to the crowd. Pryn looked at her companion.

Examining his knuckles, he moved on to another nail to gnaw—and once more began to walk.

As they passed more onlookers, Pryn demanded: "Who is he . . . ?"

"Nynx," the giant said pensively. "I *think* someone told me that was his name." He put his hand to his belly, scratching the hair there with broad nubs. "He manages—or better, terrorizes—some of the younger women too frightened to work here by themselves."

"You must have beaten him up in a fight once!" Pryn declared; she had heard of such encounters between men in her town. "You beat him up, and now he's afraid you might beat him up again . . . ?"

"No." The giant sighed. "I've never touched him. Oh, I suppose if it came to a fight, though he's less than half my age, I'd probably kill him. But I think he's been able to figure that out too." He gave a snort that ended in the scarred, broken-toothed smile. "Myself, I go my way and do what I want. Nynx—if that is his name—reads it as he will. But from the way he reads it, I suspect I will not *have* to kill him. Someone else will do it for me, and within the year, I'll wager. I've seen too many of him." He gave another snort. "Such readings are among the things civilized life teaches. You say you can read and write. You'll learn that soon if you stay around here."

"What did he want with me, before?" Pryn asked.

"Probably the same thing he wanted from the girl." The giant went on rubbing his stomach. "Beer," he said pensively. "I hear it was invented not more than seventy-five years ago by barbarians in the south. Whoever brought its fermentation to the cities has doomed us to a thousand years of such bellies as mine—" he glanced at Pryn — "and yours!" He laughed.

Pryn looked down at herself. She didn't know the word "beer" and wondered if it could possibly be responsible, whatever it was, for her plumpness.

As they neared the end of the bridge, the giant said: "Here, why don't I show you around through the—"

The naked boy who ran around the newel post to stop just before them, if he was not the young barbarian she'd seen before with the portly man in the toga, could have been one of his fabled brothers. Green eyes blinked, questioning, at the giant, at Pryn, and back.

The giant said: "Not now, little friend. Perhaps later on—I'll come meet you this evening, if I remember. But not now."

The boy held his stance a moment, then ran off.

"Come," the slave said, before Pryn had a chance to question. "Let me show you around through the Spur's most interesting square—the Old Kolhari Market."

For beyond the bridge stretched an open expanse set with vending stalls, green and grey awnings, and thatched-over sheds. Porters pushed between them with baskets of fruit, tools, grain, pots, fabric, fish—some were even filled with smaller baskets. Women wheeled loud barrows over the red brick paving. Here and there, brick had worn down till you could see sections of green stone beneath.



As they walked into the market place—five times the size of the market square at Ellamon, at least—the tall slave, who, till now, Pryn had thought of as friendly but somehow reticent, began to talk—softly, insistently, and with an excitement Pryn found stranger and stranger.

### 3. OF MARKETS, MAPS, CELLARS, AND CISTERNS

"The city fascinates—as all who come to it expect it to. Do certain country markets necessarily secrete cities about themselves? Must a nation raise markets, and cities around them?" The giant slowed as they entered between two rows of stalls. Those left held wooden rakes and brass-headed mallets. Those right were filled with leafy green, knobbly yellow, and smooth red vegetables. "The city sits in the midst of empire, a miniature of all that surrounds it: a map on which—true—you cannot read distances and directions, but on which you can mark qualities of material existence as well as the structure of certain spiritual interactions. People come from the country to the city with country wares, country skills; you need only look at who walks in its streets, who lives in its hovels and High Courts to know

what is abroad in the land. I told you, over there live the barbarians most recently up from the south? A bit west, above the Khora, is a neighborhood of northern valley folk who still wear pastel robes, loose hoods pulled up about the old women's faces and thrown back from the corn-rowed heads of the men, their hems stained to the knees with brackish street-muds that would never soil them in their own green-walled land. Two streets below is an enclave of desert families, the men with copper wires sewn up about their ears, the women with tell-tale dots of purple dabbed on their chins. If you walk the unpaved alleys between, you will see desert boys, in moody clusters stalking close to the mud walls, suddenly spot a lone valley dweller in pale, ragged orange crossing at the corner; and you will hear the desert youths call the same taunts that, as grown warriors in the land of their parents, they would cry from their camels as they rode to meet the long-robed invaders. But look! The Old Market here is only a particularly intensive part of the map of the nation around it.

"You have noticed those casks there. They contain the southern 'beer' that so puzzled you a moment back, though in Kolhari it has become the passion of nearly every free laborer. Note that young woman, with

her pitcher, hesitating behind the crowd lined up at the syphon.

"Though I have never been inside her home, simply from passing her in the market, seeing her on the street with her mother, watching her run across Black Avenue to greet her father, I have learned a great deal about her—and her situation. Her father is a workman, who loves his beer with the best, but who, some years back, had the notion and the money to hire several of his fellows, specializing in the laying of underground clay pipes; his skill and the skill of the artisans he employs has improved his condition in every way. The girl's mother was once a washer woman who laundered fine fabrics for the families of Saltese.

"The girl plays beautifully on several of the stringed instruments they carve so well in the east. When she was a baby, a wise woman, begging from door to door in the city, saw the child, cast bones and wooden coins on the pavement, and read in the array of a great and profitable musical talent asleep in the infant's fingers. The parents accordingly set the child to study with one of the eastern music masters who had recently located here, as soon as she was old enough. The prophecy seems to be fulfilling itself, and her talent has awakened. Already she has composed several sacred lit-

anies, and several times now her mother, presuming upon that old acquaintance with the mistresses for whom she once did washing, has taken the girl to wealthy homes in the suburbs to play. Several times now the girl has been requested to entertain at gatherings of the lords in Neveryona, for which she and her family have been handsomely compensated. Only last week, in fact, when she was playing some of her compositions for the discerning and glamorous lunching about a flowered and be-statued pool, an elderly Baronine, moved deeply by the young woman's song, suggested, so rumor has it, that if the artist would compose something in praise of the Child Empress, an audience might be arranged at the High Court itself. Yes, that is the very girl we are observing now, her pitcher on her thumb, hesitating between sophisticated cider and common beer.

"Certainly, by now, you have your own notions about which direction she will finally turn. Will contagion or sympathy govern her choice? How many of the factors I have outlined will go into the final overbalancing we call decision? All, I suspect—if only because she is a particularly sensitive person."

Pryn had listened to much of this, but from time to time she had let her mind, if not her feet, wander down alleys entirely dif-

ferent from the ones down which her companion would have led her. She forced open the ripe fig a woman in a stall had handed her and bit the sweet purple, flecked with white seeds, turning her own thoughts that had gone their own ways as she had strolled between awning and awning.

Occasionally the huge slave's monologue had seemed to coincide with the real market they walked through; more times than not, however, it seemed to exist on quite another level. One woman with a green painted tray, for example, had grinned at Pryn and handed her a succulent peach, which Pryn had eaten to its red, runnelled pit—then thrown that pit down onto the brick. It had all occurred without a mention from the giant extemporizing beside her. Another example? The musician whom the slave had *described* was certainly as sweet and attractive and docile a creature as might have existed. The young woman Pryn had actually *seen*, however, hesitating between the beer and cider barrels, was rather shabbily dressed in what may once have been an elegant bit of fabric, but now it was quite frayed and stained and bunched about her, every which way. Her hair was wild, her hips were wide, her shoulders narrow, and she blinked and turned, from barrel to barrel, one finger hooked through

her jug handle, swinging it wide as if to some clanging, inner rhythm. The moment the slave had turned toward the fountain, Pryn had seen the young woman suddenly fling the jar down—so that red clay shattered on red brick! Then she'd stalked off between the stalls. Four or five times more Pryn saw her, now at the end of this aisle, now crossing another, arms folded, staring ahead, making her headlong way around this stall or that. Was she thinking of some great musical composition, Pryn had wondered; or perhaps she was contemplating her own explanation for the array of tools and produce about them. Once, coming around a stand of flowers, the musician actually brushed against the slave (it was between mummers and toys); she stepped back, unfolded her arms, and blinked up at him with baffled but distinctly approving surprise that clearly held recognition. Then she folded her arms once more and marched off. But as she had already had her place in the narration, none of this registered on the voice that had wound on and on among the vendors and porters. Seconds later another vendor, this time a man, had suddenly held out two blood-black plums. Pryn had taken one and sunk her teeth in it, nodding her gratitude. The giant, however, had not even noticed—nor had he halted his peroration. The ven-

dor, smiling and shaking his head, had put the other plum back. This slave and I? thought Pryn. It is as if we are walking through different markets, in different cities. But the fig, offered her by a woman behind a counter piled high with them, had brought Pryn's thinking to its turn. Vendors were not handing free fruit to *everyone* among these stalls and aisles, she realized.

Is it something about *me*?

But the only thing about *me*, she went on to herself logically, is that I'm walking with *him*. Could it be that she *was* walking through his city, his market, in some way she did not yet know?

The giant, who had been quiet a while, spoke again: "You said your companions were looking for Gorgik the Liberator?" For the first time since they had left the bridge, he looked at Pryn directly. "Would you like me to take you to him?" He smiled for the first time since they had left the Bridge of Lost Desire.

"Is the Liberator your master?" Pryn asked.

Again his scarred face became grave: "You ask very simple questions that are almost impossible to answer."

Pryn started to speak, but a notion overtook her that no doubt overtook you several pages ago—indeed, if it took Pryn longer to realize than it took you, it was not because Pryn was the stupider; it was simply

because for her this was real life, not a tale; and it was all a *very* long time ago, so that the many tales that have nudged you to such a reading had not yet been written.

"Come," the giant repeated. He started to leave the market by a narrow street.

"Shouldn't we go back across the bridge and up into the city?" Pryn asked. "The men who brought me into town stopped at a great house out in the suburbs, where the Liberator stays. . . ."

The man half snorted, half laughed. "If you want the Liberator, come with me!"

Tossing away the fig stem, Pryn hurried up to reach the giant's side. "He . . . isn't *in* the house in the suburbs?"

The giant looked at her, considering. "It's a trick I learned when I worked as a messenger for a great southern ruler, the Dragon Lord Aldamir. Many people are curious as to the whereabouts of the Liberator. I make sure there are endless loud voices answering that curiosity. There have been no open conflicts as of yet directly traceable to the High Court—but there *have* been spies." He narrowed his eyes. "It's a good idea, when people are curious, to give them something to sustain that curiosity—and direct it."

"You're not really a slave," and it was much easier to say

than Pryn had thought it would be, "are you?"

"I've sworn that while a man or woman wears the iron collar in Nevèrÿon, I shall not take the one I wear from my neck."

They turned a corner.

"The opposition says that the only reason I exist is because the reign of the Child Empress itself is lenient and liberating," he went on. "But though the slave population in urban centers has always been low—and is getting lower—there are still road-, mine-, and agricultural-slaves by the gangload, as well as a whole host of house workers and estate slaves, owned largely by hereditary royalty. Do you see that old tavern building three streets down?" He stopped to point. "In the basement of that inn are the real headquarters of 'Gorgik the Liberator.'"

When Pryn glanced up, the giant again wore his scarred smile. "But, like all things concerning the Liberator, one approaches it by a somewhat devious route. Come along here."

The alley he led her down certainly didn't go toward the indicated inn but in a completely oblique direction. The sense of adventure that had dissolved into a kind of quivering anomie when the riders had left her on the street was now rewritten across the field of its own dissolution without really reforming it. She felt excitement; she

also felt discomfort. Before, she definitely hadn't *wanted* an adventure—but would have accepted it. Now, dragons notwithstanding, she was unsure if she wanted an adventure at all and was equally unsure what accepting it might mean.

"This way, girl."

Off the alley was another yard. In it stood another cistern. The stone wall came up to Pryn's waist. The man walked to it, grabbed one of the split birch logs lying across it, and swung it back. Frayed bits of rope were tied to it, as though a canvas had once been lashed there.

The man picked up a bit of white mortar from the wall's top and tossed it in.

Moments later, its clatter on the rock floor echoed up. "You see?" He grinned. "No water." Turning to sit his naked buttock on the wall, he swung one leg over, then the other. "Follow me down." He grasped some handhold within, moved to stand on it, and dropped, by stages. His head vanished; his hand disappeared from the ledge.

Had Pryn read, or even heard of, those tales we have mentioned, she would doubtless have used this opportunity to flee—as indeed I would advise any of my readers to do who might find themselves in a similar situation. But this *was* a long time ago. She could not have heard such stories.

Feeling unpleasant, angry, and frustrated, Pryn climbed over the wall at the same spot as the man, to find, inside, immense, rusty staples set in the inner stone, making a kind of ladder. As she climbed down by lichen-flecked rock, as shadow slid up over her eyes like water, Pryn wondered briefly, as well might you, what if this man were *not* who he implied he was, but rather some strange and distressing creature who would hack her to pieces once she set foot on the bottom. (Though *most* of those tales had not been told, a few, of course, had.) She stumbled—the last rung was missing—to be grasped at her shoulder by his great hand. "Watch yourself. This way."

The man paused below a torch burning in a niche high in the stone. Pryn came up beside him. The flickering banked at his scar, pulsing and falling and threatening to overspill onto his inner cheek. He smiled at her—turning his face, with its broken tooth, into a mask a mummer might wreak terror with. (There was a flat glow on his shoulders.) Despite the demon look, Pryn breathed easier for the first time since they'd entered the alley.

He started ahead through a vaulted arch into a rock-walled room with half a dozen torches about, shadowing and brightening the dirty mosaic floor. As she followed him in, a man and

a woman carrying a split-log bench between them came in by another wide entrance, glanced at them (the woman smiled), set the bench on a pile of benches by the wall, and nodded to Pryn's companion. Their presence somehow abolished the momentary demonic image and moved friendship from a possibility to be gambled on to a probable fact. Then they went.

Pryn followed the giant into the next room—with even more torches on the walls, in iron cages. Perhaps twenty-five men were there; and half a dozen women. Some who had been sitting on benches now stood. All looked. Most standing stepped back. One man called: "So, our Liberator has returned from his survey of the city! How did you find it, Gorgik?"

The big man did not answer, but only raised a hand, smiling.

One woman turned to another near her and said something like: "... *vabemesh har'norko nivu shar* . . ."

Gorgik's response was an outright laugh. "Ah—! Which reminds me," he called to her. "I've been meaning to ask you something for a while now—"

Another man interrupted: "The others are waiting for you, down in the receiving hall, Gorgik."

"Yes, of course." Gorgik nodded and walked.

As the others moved after him, Pryn wondered if she

should fall back among them; but one man stood back to let her go forward just as, a few feet ahead, Gorgik looked at her and beckoned her to his side.

She hurried up. This time his hand fell on her shoulder, reminding her for all the world of the portly gentleman in the toga and the naked barbarian boy she'd seen on the bridge—quite ludicrously, though she could not have written why unless she invented a new sign.

This archway was hung with heavy drapes. A man before them pushed the hangings aside, and she and Gorgik went through, to start down wide steps.

Pryn blinked.

So many more flares and torches along the walls of this hall, yet it seemed so much darker—it was dozens of times as big! Distantly she heard free waters. Because she associated the sound with outside vastness, inside seemed even larger.

At the hall's center, a metal brazier, wider across than Gorgik was tall, flickered over its coals with low flame. As they descended, Pryn looked up to see half a dozen balconies at different heights about the walls. One corner of the hall looked as if it were still being dug out. Earth and large stones were still heaped there. On another wall she saw a carved dragon, three times a man's height—though from the rubble piled low against

it, it too had only recently been dug free. Overhead, large beams jutted beneath the ceiling, from which, here and there, hung tangles of rope.

As they came down the steps, someone called: "The Liberator!"

A roar rose from the fifty, seventy-five, possibly hundred and fifty people about the hall. (Pryn, unused to crowds, had little experience by which to judge such numbers.) It quieted, but did not die. The whispers and comments of so many, echoing under the high roof, joined with the sound of falling waters.

Pryn looked aside as she reached the bottom step.

Water poured between squat columns beside one of the balconies, the falls spewing fog that wet the wall behind it, to rush, foaming and glimmering, along a wide ditch. The conduit ran between hewn rock balustrades; after going beneath one bridge of stone and one of wood that looked as if it had been recently built between the remains of a stone one which had fallen in, it ran off through an arched culvert in the dragon-carved wall.

They crossed the wooden bridge and passed near enough to the brazier to feel the heat from its beaten, black walls. Ahead were more steps, five or six. They led up to a large seat, half covered with hides. A stone wing rose at one side from un-

der a tiger's pelt. From the other, a sculpted bird's head, beak wide in a silent screech, stuck from under black fur.

The others halted. Hand still on Pryn's shoulder, Gorgik went to the steps. At the first one, he bent again. "Sit at the foot here."

The third step from the bottom was covered with white hide. Pryn turned and sat on it, running her hand over it. She felt grit. White cow? Horse? (Who, she wondered, had charge of cleaning them? She put her heels on the edge of the step below, while Gorgik mounted to the seat.

"My friends—!" The Liberator's voice echoed under high vaulting. (Pryn glanced at the ceiling and thought of the tavern above. Had it been anywhere near the size of this subterranean vastness?) "It's good to see so many familiar faces—and good to see so many new ones! Still, it reassures me that our number is small enough that I can address you informally, that I can gather you together so that my voice reaches all of you at once, that I can walk among you and recognize which of you has been with us awhile and which of you is new. Soon, our growing numbers may abolish that informality."

Pryn again looked over the faces that had, at least a moment back, seemed numberless.

She started!

Beyond those standing near-

est, she saw, in his ragged head-dress, the scarred Fox turn to whisper to the bearded Badger, while just behind him the squat Western Wolf frowned—at her!

"That so many of my friends *are* here in the city warms me. That so many of you have come here to the city to offer me your support speaks to me of the unrest throughout Nevèrÿon because of the injustices marring our nation. The difference between the number of you here yesterday and the number here today tells me of the growing power, that informs our cause. Yesterday, I left you with a question: Would I be able to get a hearing at the High Court to present my case? Today, I bring you a gratifying answer: Yes." A murmur rose over water's rush, then fell. "I received the news earlier this afternoon—and went to walk in the city, while it rang in my head, while it afflicted my eyes, till the city itself seemed wondrous and new, and the market, where I so frequently go to hear the harmonies of labor and commerce, seemed a new market, ringing with new music, a market in which I had never walked before." Again Pryn turned to look up. Mostly what she could see was a large knee obscuring the face and a rough elbow that moved behind its gesturing hand. "The High Court has agreed to give me an audience with one of its most powerful ministers, Lord Krodar!"



Amidst the approbations, one woman called, "Why won't they let you speak to the Child Empress herself?"

"—whose reign is monstrous and monotonous!" called a man.

Coming from a place where such things just weren't said, Pryn was as startled as she had been by the sight of the Fox and the Wolf. But others laughed. Hearing that laughter, she decided she liked the feeling of freedom it gave—and remembered flying.

"My plans are prudent and practical," Gorgik countered, which brought more laughter with it, "monstrosity notwithstanding. I am satisfied with this as a beginning. You come from all over Nevèryon," Gorgik's voice echoed on. "You come with your different reasons, your different gifts. This young woman at my feet comes with no more than curiosity." Pryn looked up again. The face—what she could see of it beyond the knee—smiled before it looked back up. "I accept that; and I am as happy to have her with us as I am any one here. You there—" Over Pryn's head the great hand went out. "You hail from the foothills of the Argina, am I right? I can tell by the leather-braiding about your arm. Once, when I passed through your province, I saw a low stone building with seven sharply pointed, triangular doors, the stone head of a different animal

at each apex. When I asked what the building was, I was told a phrase in your language . . . ?"

"*'Ya'Kik ya Kra Kyk!'*" a heavy man with close-cropped hair called out.

"Yes," answered Gorgik. "That's it! And can you tell me what it means?"

"It means the House of the Goddess who Weaves Baskets to Carry Grain to Women, Children, and Animals."

"And is she a goddess of freedom or slavery?"

The man frowned. "She's a goddess of prosperity . . ." He raised a hand to tug self-consciously at the leather braids looped on his fleshy biceps. "She's a goddess of labor. So I guess she's a goddess of freedom . . ."

"Good!" called Gorgik. "Then she might smile on us and our cause, here, even though there are few women among us and, today at any rate, only one child. . . ."

The laughter, friendly enough, made Pryn look up. Beyond his blocky knee, the Liberator looked down at her, while Pryn wondered at her demotion from young woman to child. She looked out again at the Red Badger, who, with his big mouth, missing teeth, and new beard, had gotten her into the first trouble of her journey.

"It is important for all of us to learn about, and learn to respect, the customs over all our

land. You there—" This time he pointed toward the barbarian woman who, again, had leaned to whisper to a neighbor.

She looked up.

"When I was a youngster, running in the streets of this city, I used to hear the women from the south talking the southern language together. The word that again and again fell out of those lingering, liquid sentences was *nivu*. When I first began to learn a few words of the tongue from your men, it never came from their mouths. Yet even today, walking in our streets, one hears you southern women talking of *nivu* this and *nivu* that. Tell me; what does it mean? I know enough of your language to ask for food and lodging and to tell when a man is saying he's full-fed and content or when he's saying he's sick and hungry. But I still don't know the significance of this word."

The woman's rough yellow hair, tied behind her neck, clearly bespoke barbaric origins. "My Liberator," she called out in a friendly enough voice, but with the thickest barbarian accent Pryn had ever heard, "if you knew anything of your life and language, you would know that *nivu* is not a man's word."

Gorgik laughed. "So I was told once before. But we are all friends here, men and women, with a common cause that will benefit us both. We work for

justice; and justice should have no secrets. Tell me the meaning of the word."

"Very well, my Liberator. *Nivu* is an old barbarian term that means—"

"FOOLS—!"

Later Pryn realized she had seen the man—squatting on the rough stone balcony by the falling water—some minutes before he stood up, arms out from his sides, belly jerking visibly with the breath he heaved into each word:

"YOU FOOLS—the *lot* of you!"

#### 4. OF FATE, FORTUNE, MAYHEM, AND MYSTERY

"Every one of you—duped fools!"

Pryn heard the barbarian accent across the echoing hall, saw his yellow hair, his close-set eyes. He grasped the rope that ran toward the ceiling beam, jerked it loose from where it was tied to the balcony's rim, and went on shouting: "You think you have a Liberator before you? Can't you hear the voice of a tyrant in the making? Before you sits a man whose every word and act is impelled by lusts as depraved as any in the nation, who would make a slave of all and anyone to satisfy them, calling such satisfaction freedom! If you can't see what's in front of

you, then look behind you! Look at Small Sarg—Sarg the barbarian! A prince in my land, I came to yours a slave! The man you call 'Liberator' bought me as a slave—and, true, he told me I was free; and, true, for three years we fought together against slavery throughout Nevèrÿon. But when he was finished with me, he sold me! Sold me as a slave! To traders on their way to the eastern desert—thinking that he would never see me again! But I have escaped! I have returned from slavery! And as I love my freedom, so I have sworn his death!" Gripping the rope, wrapping it about one forearm and again about one leg, the barbarian was over the rail, in the air, swinging down. As he passed above the brazier, his sword, high in his free hand, flared with light.

Above Pryn, on the fur-covered seat, Gorgik pushed himself up, flung out a hand. Pryn saw the big foot slide on fur and threw herself to the hide as the barbarian on the rope hurtled—so slowly, it seemed. Was it the size of the hall . . . ?

Then, quickly, a man leapt from the gathering—most of whom, Pryn saw with her cheek pressed to the rug, were either crouching or staggering back.

Bound at the instep with leather bands, a bony foot struck the hide before Pryn's face. She twisted her head to look up at a very thin blade coming out of

a rough-out leather sheath, rising in a leather-bound fist.

The barbarian was suddenly in front of her, only this stranger in the way. Pryn heard body and body smack. Bodies grappled, falling at, or more likely on, the Liberator's feet as Gorgik, grunting, tried to scramble aside.

The released rope dragged away across dirt.

The struggling men thumped, thrashing, down the steps. A foot hit Pryn's hip, which was when she looked again; so she didn't see whose. The men rolled out on the dirty tiles.

Gorgik stood, his own blade finally drawn. Pryn scrambled up the furs to crouch by him.

At the steps' foot, grunts and gasps and snarls; the barbarian and the man with the leather-bound hands and feet pummeled and bit and gouged at each other.

There was blood on the white hide.

Those who had rushed away rushed back.

Up from the grappling men, blood spurted—a crimson arch, a foot and a half high. Blood puddled the tile. The spurt fell. At the puddle's edge, red wormed along a grouted crevice.

The barbarian was still, curled on his side like someone suddenly gone to sleep.

The other pushed himself up on all fours, head hanging. He

went back to one knee. Thin, sun-burned shoulders—as well as his hands and feet, his knees and elbows were wrapped with leather. His black hair was long and in one placed matted together—but by old dirt, Pryn realized, not blood. Breathing hard, he turned to grin at the throne.

And Pryn saw he had just one eye. The pupil was black, wet; the white was deeply blood-shot. Momentarily Pryn thought he must have just lost the other; but the way the whole eyeless side of his face was sunken, with only the little slash of a permanently sealed lid—the loss must have occurred years ago.

"You're safe, master!" The little man laughed. The gaps and rots rimming his gum would have made the Badger's mouth seem sound. He took big, gasping breaths. The muscles over his narrow chest looked strained to the tearing with them. "See, master? You're safe!" He grinned; he panted. The eye still seemed near tears. Looking about, he pointed at the barbarian's sword, some feet away. "No harm from that now!"

The hilt of his own thin knife jutted awkwardly in the barbarian's chest.

Somewhere off in firelight, the rope still swung, slowly.

"Say—do you know me, master?"

Others moved up to crowd behind those already crowding.

"Do you remember little Noyeed, from among the slaves at the obsidian mines . . . ?"

The Liberator frowned.

"No, you don't remember me, master! I was an ugly, awkward, dirty boy. You were the foreman of our work gang, a slave like the rest of us—oh, yes!" The little man looked about at the gawkers. "He *was* a slave, you know—my master. In the obsidian mines at the foot of the Faltha Mountains. I was a slave with him!" The little man threw up his chin, grabbed the flesh of his neck with bloody, bound hands and pulled the skin taut. "See! I am free! I escaped the mines! My neck is bare! And *he* still wears his collar, in our name! Wears it for us all! But when he was a slave, when I was a slave—" Noyeed turned back, his eye wet, blinking over his atrocious grin—"he saved my life! You saved my life, master! And I have saved yours! I'd save yours a hundred times and give mine in the bargain; I've never forgotten you, master! Never!"

Gorgik still frowned. "I . . . remember you, Noyeed. And I—" Gorgik stepped down a step. "I saved your life?"

"Aye, you saved me—so that I could go on to become Noyeed the runaway, Noyeed the scavenger, Noyeed the bandit—" He grimaced—"Noyeed the murderer!" With a shrill laugh, he shook his head. "No, master,

I'm *not* a good man!" He got to his feet. "But you saved me—so that twenty-odd years later I could meet this barbarian dog, himself only just escaped from slavers in the west, hiding out in the caves of Makalata at the edge of the desert, skulking there among beggars, bones, and ashes, with his tales of treachery and betrayal, his plots for revenge and assassination! A madman, I tell you! A madman! He was going to assassinate my Gorgik, my master, the great and famous Gorgik, the Gorgik men and women speak of as the Liberator all over Nevèrÿon—the Gorgik without whom I never would have lived to make what little I have of my poor manhood!" Noyeed turned to the throne. "I followed him, master! I followed him all the way across Nevèrÿon. I followed him here to the capital, and finally to this subterranean hall! I tell you, half the time I couldn't even *believe* his madness—that he would try to kill you! But when he made his move—" The little man scurried to the corpse, one hand touching the ground three times in the journey (Pryn thought of dismounting from a dragon), grasped his hilt, and pulled the blade free to raise it in torchlight— "I was here to make mine!" He looked at Gorgik with his wet, black eye. "I was here for you, master, as you were for me—when I was a boy

and we were both slaves in those cursed mines. Remember it?"

"From what I remember," Gorgik said, "you might have more reason to hate me than to love me, Noyeed."

"Hate my master? Hate the man who saved me?" Noyeed laughed again. "You are a great man now, master. Myself, I'm only a breath of freedom better than a slave. But I do not pretend to understand the jokes and jests of the great." He turned to the others. "My master jokes! But isn't he a great man, my Liberator, my master, my Gorgik?"

The mumbling through the gathered men and women seemed more confusion than agreement. But it also seemed to serve the little man for corroboration. He grinned again, poking his blade-tip about for its sheath.

Men had crowded onto the steps, trying to see. One brushed Pryn's arm. She glanced up to see the Western Wolf, at this point oblivious to her.

"Shall I tell you how he saved my life?" Noyeed looked back at Gorgik. "Shall I tell them, master?"

Gorgik came down another step, his frown—because of the scar, Pryn decided—particularly fierce. "Yes. You may tell them. Tell us all."

The little man turned back to the others and drew another

gulping breath. "I was not much below fourteen when I and some friends, playing near our village in the east, were taken by slavers. We fought, my friends and I—and I watched my nearest friend torn in three by two slavers who would slake their lusts on her body there. I saw my brother's legs broken and his ribs cracked so that two stuck from the skin of his side—a day later they threw him, still breathing, down a cliff—I heard that. Him breathing. I didn't see it. One of them had hit me in the face with the blunt end of a stick so hard the eyeball burst in my head—" He jabbed a thumb at his sunken socket. "I walked with them three days completely blind. Only after that did the first shadows of sight return in my remaining eye. Somewhere in it a birthday passed that I did not speak of and neither did they. A week later, they sold me among an even dozen to the obsidian mines, where I was given over to one of the barracks where Gorgik here—" the thumb jabbed toward the Liberator—"was the slave foreman. Oh, he was a slave, yes! But he was a powerful one! Had we been working on the grounds of some great lord's estate, and not in that stinking Imperial pit, he would have worn the white collar-cover of the highest-ranking slave — everyone said so! And he deserved it! But no such honors

were given in that deadly hole. You see that scar on his face?" Again the little man pointed; and Pryn wondered if this were a tale he'd told frequently at taverns and campfires across Nevèrÿon, or if it were a secret story, rehearsed silently and continually for one glorious recitation. "You see it? Didn't he have it the first time I blinked my good eye clear of what stuck my lashes together, half out of my head with fever and weak from thirst, and saw him for the first time, standing above me, looking down at me where I lay on my foul straw? They told me later he had gotten it in a brawl with another slave who went after him with a pickax because Gorgik had protected the other boy from the torments of the first—it was legend in the camp. All talked of it. Am I right, master?"

"Was it, now?" Gorgik snorted. "And I cannot even remember the other boy's name. Go on, Noyeed."

"He was kind to me, my master was. I was just a child, smaller than that girl—" which was a thumb at Pryn—"half blind, almost too sick to walk—though that didn't stop them from working me. They sent me down in the hole anyway, to carry out scraps of rock through the mud and dark. A slave who did not go down into the mines received neither food—which perhaps I could

have done without a day or two—nor water—which I needed to guzzle, constantly and continuously, for I always felt my skin was on fire over my bones. My master there, often he held my head while I drank—or threw up when I drank too much; or he would let me rest against the mine walls, looking stern at any man about to protest my indigence. And when, in the evening, back in the barracks, I would fall on my straw, too weak to fight for my supper and water, he would bring me food and a full gourd to drink from and sometimes would even sit and talk with me, joking to cheer me up, staying with me long enough so that no one came to steal my supper—making a little easier my steady slide towards a death that, even then, I only saw as an inevitable relief from the terror. I thought I would die. So did they. That night a bunch of miners in the dark came to my corner, held me down, and used my boy's body like a woman's, one after the other, now grunting, now biting my shoulder, now hissing threats of death should I cry out. The next day, even the guards declared I was too far gone to go down into the hole. But that evening, after supper, Gorgik brought a big-hipped man with a large nose, who wore clean blue wool, to my pallet—a eunuch of some noblewoman whose caravan had stopped for the

night at the foot of the Falthas. She wanted a slave—for what reason I never knew. But Gorgik, as foreman, had been asked to pick one out; and chose me—seeing clearly that any such change would have had to be for the better. The eunuch took me back to the Lady's tents and camels and provision wagons. It began to rain, I remember, while we walked. Twice between the barracks and the caravan I fell, and the eunuch, with many grunts of disgust, helped me to my feet. I remember standing alone among the tents, my eye closed, my head up, tasting the drops, feverish, more asleep than awake, and knowing—"the bright eye blinked—"as I knew *you* knew, master, that those who came to abuse me *that* night would find only my soiled straw, stained with the blood that had run between my legs from the night before and stinking of the urine I had spilled there because I was too scared to crawl to the peetrough." The little man, standing by the fallen barbarian, joggled the shoulder with his foot. "The noblewoman didn't buy me. Why anyone might want such a sick and half-blind puppy as I was—why I should *think* anyone might, or why Gorgik there should think so . . ." The little man blinked his eye. "Such is not real thinking; only the desires of desperation! Eventually the eunuch took me back to the

mine. By now I was stopping every fifteen or twenty feet, my body blasted and shaken by a rasping cough, the snot flying, the mucus stringing my chin—I think I remember the eunuch, out of something between disgust and compassion, taking out his key and unlocking the hinge of my collar so I might breathe easier, though he left it around my neck. It was still dark and raining when I was brought back to the barracks. Nobody noticed that my collar was open. And the eunuch was quickly off to find a replacement. But something had happened. Sick as I was, I had walked through damp fields, had passed by trees and looked at starlit mountains almost as a free man might look. Frequently the barracks were not secured on rainy nights—where might a slave go in his iron collar? But my collar was loose! I was exhausted, yet also feverishly awake. The guard was gone in the rain with the eunuch. I pushed to my knees and made my way to the door, refusing by main force to cough again, keeping my mouth wide or clenching my teeth by turns, gasping through my nose to suppress any sound that might give me away. The other slaves slept. I was outside the door—and fell in the mud. And crawled in the mud, I tell you now, with the pebbles cutting my knees and my hands. I know how weak I was; that night I

crawled no more than a thousand feet from the mine encampment; and lay the day in the woods. Why they didn't come looking for me, I don't know. Given my obvious destiny—death—perhaps they thought it better not to pursue me. Perhaps it was simply because I was no man and not much of a boy; or perhaps they were discouraged by a word from my master." Noyeed flashed another lopsided grin at Gorgik. "I know that toward evening I began to drag myself along again, starvation now joining my other ills. Still crawling, I finally reached a clearing, which, from the worn footpaths and the pattern of tent-post holes across the ground, I realized was the camp the caravan I had been to the previous night had, earlier in the day, moved on from. Such a wealthy caravan as that leaves a wealth of garbage. That night I ate their garbage, slept in it, and woke to find myself rained on as I lay in it and slept again without moving; and no doubt ate more of it when I awoke. I left my collar in it. Somehow, even open, its stiff hinges had made it cling about my neck till I pulled it apart with my own hands. No doubt it's still there, where I buried it, in that muddy refuse pit beside the caravan site at the base of the ragged Falthas. And somehow my fever passed. I chewed my roots, and when



one root made me sick, chewed no more like it. Somehow I sensed the ones that gave me nourishment and dug up more of the same. I ate beetles that scurried over logs before my dirty fingers. And when, on still another night, I walked into the firelit circle about a gathering, I did not care if they were slavers or worse, so long as they would speak to me, look at me, beat me—even kill me.

"The like of you fine folk *would* consider them worse. They fed me. They beat me. They washed me. They made fun of me. They gave me a place to sleep. They joked with me, and they cursed me, and they set me hard—and, later, even dangerous—tasks. And though I ran away from them almost as long ago as I crawled away from the mine, they were the closest thing I ever had to a family, once I was snatched from my own. I follow their profession to this day—they were bandits! I admit it! I'm proud of it! To be a bandit is better than to be a slave! Ah, master! My memory muddles much of this! But what I recall clearly through it all is *you*! You, master! You were, the one who carried me up and down from the pit when I was too sick to walk. You were the one who sent me out of the slave pen with the noblewoman's eunuch the night the others would have set upon me and killed me with their lusts." The little man looked

down at the corpse; Pryn could see a sheepish grin pulling through the small, hard muscles of his face. "Treachery? Betrayal? The things this dog accused you of, even if you *had* done them, are nothing so special. Believe me, I've done my share of both. If all of us who'd done so had to die for it this day, there'd be few left in Nevèrÿon, either in the High Court or the pits."

One woman and several of the men chose to laugh at that, which made the little man look up, grinning.

"I remember you in the mines, Noyeed," Gorgik said. "I remember holding your head while you drank, and carrying your hot little body against me down into the hole. No doubt I shooed a few miners away who thought to put the rations of a dying boy to better use than you might. Such was my nature then; it's much the same now."

Noyeed laughed again. "Master, *you* gave me my life! *You* sent me from the mines to have that taste of freedom that returned to me the possibility of life in the midst of death! That's why you must live!" Turning, he spat on the corpse. "That's why this barbarian dog had to die!"

"Don't dishonor his body." Gorgik came down the last step and put his hand on Noyeed's shoulder, much as he had done with Pryn when they'd first en-

tered the hall. "I remember you, Noyeed; and I remember all you tell of. Perhaps I remember it better than you. You've proved yourself a friend. But that man, dead on the tile, was also a friend—once. Had his friendship not been so great, indeed his hatred might have been less."

From the back of the crowd a man cried: "What's up there? What's that up there on the—" People about Pryn turned.

On another balcony, a man stood with a short spear in his hand. His spear arm drew back—

Noyeed grabbed the Liberator's wrist. "Master, it's the dead dog's allies! He *told* me he might have more with him! But I didn't believe him, especially once he attacked you without any—"

The spear sailed through the air.

Again Pryn flung herself away, rolled over down shallow steps, came up on her knees, and pushed to her feet amidst confusion. Weapons were out all about her. She looked up to see a dozen strangers running down the far steps, weapons waving, on the other side of the water—to meet another dozen, from among those gathered in the hall, who were running up.

Someone staggered against her; Pryn looked to see the Red Badger. He was opening and closing his mouth, reaching behind his back for—she saw it as he turned—a spear haft, jutting off center, between his shoul-

ders. He staggered three steps forward and fell across the dead barbarian, new beard striking the tile, to twist his head at a preposterous angle while blood rolled out over his lower lip.

Pryn dashed across the wooden bridge as another man swung down on a rope. As he came off, she nearly collided with the Wolf, who, with his sword, was fighting off an assailant who kept making feints with a viciously bladed pike.

Was it because she saw the third man coming? She grabbed the pike's end and yanked. (The man wielding it had not even seen her.) The Western Wolf leaped forward and thrust. The pike came loose in Pryn's hands. She turned with it to see fragments: a raging face shouting at her, a raised sword falling toward her, a sandaled foot stamping dirt, a fire-lit buckle holding a scabbard to a hairy thigh. Hard as she could Pryn thrust the pike's blunt end low into the belly she thought, rather than saw, was someplace among them all. Jarred to the shoulders, she watched the details become a single man, gasping, reeling along the water's edge, dropping his sword, falling back—she heard the man's head crack rock. (One man? She'd been sure it was at least five!) He rolled over the edge. Water sheeted away on both sides, then clapped over him.

The Wolf still stood, blinking in surprise.

Pryn turned to strike another intruder, who staggered up, unseeing. She hit hard, and then was off the bridge and bringing the pike down on the head of a man who had another man down, while another tried to tug him off—

Something smacked Pryn's flank. Burning, stinging, it sent her falling, made her lose vision—though she didn't drop the pike. When she could see, what she saw was a man, blind with blood from a gash across the eyes, swinging his wide blade, now left, now right, with shoulder-wrenching fury. She was on the ground, trying to get up on one knee. For a moment she wondered if the man had simply severed her—but she felt her side (while the knuckles of her fist, still grasping the pike, rubbed rock); there was no blood, no cut. The raging man swung above her, stepped over her leg—which she jerked back. He was holding the sword so that the blade had connected with the flat, rather than the edge. Until it had struck her nearly senseless, she hadn't even *seen* him . . . Pryn was up again, running. She dodged one man who hadn't seen her, and then another who had. As she neared the wall, she saw, on the balcony, practically above her, two men climbing to leap—now they were falling with drawn swords.

It wasn't fear that made her do it. Rather it was a vague, glit-

tering anger. It all happened with astonishing clarity and rapidity, within the generalized pain that she felt not as a sensation in her side, but rather as a prickling enclosing her entire body. She swung her pike up against the short sword of the falling man so that it swung back into his face—not flat-sided, either.

As he landed, she brought the pike up over his head and down against the back of his neck. He pitched forward onto the blade that had already gotten caught under his chin. (The other shouted as he landed, because he'd twisted his ankle.) The first man bubbled red from ear and nose, the blade tip under his jaw, somewhere in his brain. With the pike ahead of her, Pryn rushed up the stairs and pushed through the hangings. She tripped on rising steps. With darkness and the word "murder" filling her mind, anger threatened to spill over into terror.

Then, between one breath and the next—pain!

For a moment she thought it was new. But it was the one in her side. It had been there, yes. But now it was *not* all about her. It was in one pulsing place the size of a hand, and it clutched her flank incredibly. The end of each breath was a dull horror to get through. She lay the awkward pole down and stumbled through darkness, hurting too much really to fear. Had a rib cracked?

She walked, wondering if she might have to lie down. I have ridden a dragon, she thought. She whispered: "I have murdered a man. . . ." She corrected herself: Maybe murdered several.

The pain passed some peak and at last began to subside. Once she leaned against the wall, taking very small breaths. Murder and labyrinthine possibilities became confused in her thinking. What was it the tale-teller had said about the girl who'd killed so many people she'd begun to act quite oddly? Once more Pryn walked, thinking: I'm *looking* for something in all this darkness. *What* am I looking for? Again an image came: the tale-teller's masked friend with her twin blades. Am I *this* frightened? she thought. Why am I thinking of tales? Well, perhaps tales were better than the hacked, drowned, and skewered carnage behind her—which is when Pryn was suddenly seized with the conviction she was being followed.

Her own breath roared in the darkness—she couldn't hold it more than three steps before it came squeaking and wheezing out. Her feet sent loose stones clicking, and in the echo she was sure she heard steps behind her, stumbling as she stumbled, stepping as she stepped. On the rock there was a beating—one of her pursuers pounded his sword hilt against the wall as he came on. . . .

Staggering from the low entrance onto the cistern's floor, she nearly fell. Grey light dropped between the overhead logs.

My heart! she thought as she turned to grasp the iron staple. It's my own heart! And the pursuers were *only* her echo. She climbed—and wouldn't think about the sharpness pulsing in her side. When she was half a dozen rungs up, she paused. The pounding continued. But she could feel, in the flesh between her thumb and forefinger gripping the tarry bar—she *could* feel her heart; and it was beating far faster than the pounding, which she realized now was a real noise, echoing.

Someone was chanting too, only she couldn't make out the words. She climbed again. Her head came up between birch logs. She took another painful breath and turned to look about.

Across the cistern, just beyond the wall, Pryn saw a barbarian girl bouncing a ball; other children watched. Now that Pryn's head was above the wall, the sound was stripped of echo. The pounding was the ball's rhythmic *thack, thack, thack . . .* and the chant, the girl's shrill rhyme:

*" . . . and all the soldiers fought  
a bit  
and neither general cared a whit  
if any man of his was hit  
and blood filled up  
the cavern's pit*

*and every firebrand was lit;  
the hound took flight, the horse  
took bit,  
the child took blood at mother's  
tit. . . ."*

Another girl—maybe nine, maybe ten—glanced at Pryn, but seemed to find nothing special in a plump, bushy-headed youngster climbing out of a cistern. She turned back:

*" . . . and the eagle sighed and  
the serpent cried,  
for all my Lady's warning!"*

On warning the ball slammed into the corner of the cistern wall to go soaring. Children went prancing and jumping below it, straining to catch. One small boy kept calling: "It's my turn now! My turn! No, it's my turn!"

Sun down, summer evening lingered in the tangled streets. Stopping now and again to flex her arm or touch her ribs, Pryn wandered through one then another alley; minutes later she walked out onto the empty, red-brick square. In the center was a high stone, from which a water jet fell into a natural basin.

She'd almost reached the fountain when she realized this was the Old Market. Stalls and awnings had come down for the day; the vendors had carried off their trays, rolled away their barrows. Portable counters had been moved out, the refuse swept up, and the square cleared for night. The sky above the western roofs, a metallic pink, was streaked with silver clouds. Some became near-black when they reached the eastern blue. Pryn stopped at the rock. Bending over the foaming basin, she had to hold the edge, realizing how sore her ribs still were. So were her shoulders—the strength to batter about her with the pike was more than you used to rein a lizard. As her face fell to the water, the sky's reflection broke up and darkened with her own.

Where am I going? she thought. What am I looking for?

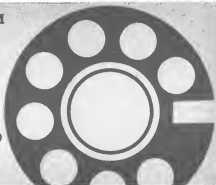
She splashed her cheeks, drank from her cupped palms, rubbed wet thumbs on her eyes, then walked on across the square toward the bridge. ■

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# THE BOOK OF THE BEAST

by Robert Stallman

If it is powerful enough, love  
can survive unimaginable trials.

**T**he last desperate people have visited the miraculous grave and gone away, most of them the same as when they came. This one sleeps on a doorstep like a homeless child. I watch him from a stairwell across the street and think whether I should help him. He is very sick and even at this distance I sense that he will soon die. Lilly urges me, but then she is always eager to save people and would have me working in a clinic if she could.

—Will you help him?

(Why this one from so many?)

—He is here.

(All right, Lilly, we will help.)

—Let me take him home.

(No. He would not understand.)

—You will frighten him.

(He must change. This begins it.)

George Beaumont's eyes snapped open, his whole body bristling with fear, breath suspended. What sound had wakened him? Huddled against the iron railing that was now warm with his own warmth, he felt like a part of the building suddenly come aware. There. Something moved in the shadows across the narrow street, a form so sinuous it



could only be an animal, a huge animal slipping from doorway to cellarway to stairs. George felt the hair on his neck standing up, his stomach tight with fear. That was the sound that had pulled him from sleep, a low moaning.

George leaped to his feet. The shadowy form across the street emerged into the lesser darkness of the pavement and reared up on its hind legs, looking at George. From its bloody jaws hung the body of a common housecat.

The man felt faint as his own sudden standing up drained the blood from his brain. Was it a bear? Taller than he was when it stood, it had a rounded head and long muzzle and small ears set close to the head. The eyes were large and luminous, a night creature's eyes. George Beaumont, called Bo by his friends back home, alone in a strange town in the dead of night, felt that a dream had somehow extended into his waking life, that dreaming and waking too soon he had pulled this apparition into his world by mistake. He wanted it not to be there.

(I will not harm you.)

The man staggered as if he had been struck in the face, the words like a physical touch inside his mind. But he felt the agony in his side moving again and knew he was not dreaming. As if from a distance, his mind noted the details of the scene:

the beast with its gleaming teeth and blue-gray fur like a huge cat but tailless, with almost human forepaws and blunt fingers where he could imagine retracted talons.

(You are sick.)

The voice felt feminine to Bo's mind, as if a woman were speaking, trying to keep him from being afraid. The fearful muzzle came close to his face. Huge, luminous eyes peered into his own.

(You have been to Malden Cemetery seeking a miracle?)

Bo nodded, his mind still at a distance.

(The sickness will take you into death soon. I will help you if you do not betray me. Will you keep my secret?)

Bo hardly understood the words, although they came into his mind as clearly as if carved in stone. He looked at the beast uncomprehendingly and nodded. His choices had been narrowing in these last months until now he had none.

(We cannot stay in the open. Come with me.)

The pain in his side was bad now. He had to limp, almost to cry out with the agony that spread across his abdomen. And then it became so intense, as it did sometimes, that he had to squat down on the sidewalk and hold himself. Hell, what did it matter, he thought, looking at the huge cat that had stopped to look back at him. Let it kill

me, he thought, squeezing the flesh of his sides with both fists, wanting to cut himself in half, to leap into a river and drown.

November 6th 1937

Dear Mary Louise,

Don't worry about me. I'm all right and have found a wonderful doctor here who is helping me. I won't be home for a while, but I think I'm getting better. Tell Doctor Goodnaugh that I can't come to the hospital for the exploratory operation because I'm under another doctor's care here. He won't probably like that, but tell him anyway. And we'll pay his bill as soon as I get back. Tell him that, and it ought to keep him out of your hair. I went to the cemetery like I was going to but it wasn't any great shakes. Just a lot of sick people, some of them sicker than me. I was really lucky to find this doctor that is treating me now because I feel lots better already. You can write me if you want in care of General Delivery, Revere, Mass.

Your husband,  
Bo

November 12, 1937

Dear George,

Come home right now. Doctor Goodnaugh is furious and said he might even get the law on you for disobeying his orders. He said you shouldn't have gone out there to Boston and that your mind is going bad

when you start thinking about miracles. He said only medical science can help you and if you don't come home you will be dead in a month.

Please George. Oh now you've got me crying again and I didn't want to cry. George you are so mean to me I cannot ever believe it. Your mother used to tell me you were always selfish and now you're doing it again even in your sickness when you should be more careful. You know how I worry about you anyway, and what is Kneipe's Jewelry going to do without you? They called again yesterday, I think it was Mr. Kneipe himself this time, and I told them you were so sick you went to Boston to see a specialist and weren't back yet.

Please George, come home.

Your loving wife,  
*Mary Louise Beaumont*

The little room was always clammy, no matter how much he used the bathroom heater he had bought to make it warmer. The plaster walls seeped with moisture underneath the faded scrolls of wallpaper, and he could always feel a draft from around the window sash. Outside a few flakes of snow whispered past the glass, and he could sometimes see a bird sailing down the wind heading inland. He was seated facing the east as he had been told, his legs folded Indian style and his arms relaxed so



that his palms rested upward on his knees. He breathed in slowly, feeling the air deep down behind his stomach, slowly building like a clear, blue column of sky inside him, cleanness inside him, he thought as he continued to inhale until he felt his rib cage expanding to the sides and the air filling him to the very top. A count of twelve, then hold for twelve, then exhale slowly so that it was twelve slow counts to get it all out again. Think of the middle of your body, the Beast had said. Think of the blazing center of life in the middle of your body. Bo tried to keep his mind on his middle, trying to imagine a blazing fire right at his navel. Sometimes when his gut hurt so bad, it wasn't hard to imagine it was a fire.

On this Thanksgiving Day, George Beaumont, called Bo by his friends but not by his wife, sat on the sagging bed with its patchwork quilt made of the left-over lives of old ladies in cold parlors. He suffered from a metastasized cancer that an exploratory operation would have revealed as hopeless. The surgeon would have looked up from the opening; his hooded eyes would have met the eyes of George's doctor, Randolph Goodnaugh of Chicago; and the surgeon would have shaken his head and pointed one rubber-sheathed finger down at the abdominal cavity now exposed.

And another round would have been lost in the eternal battle of medical science with death.

George Beaumont sat on the bed mumbling a string of words while his insides went crazy and the pain screamed at him and screamed at him and he managed for a time not to hear.

Then Bo felt suddenly free of pain. In a lightness inconceivable to a middle-aged man, somewhat overweight and big-boned anyway with size-thirteen shoes, he found himself floating against the ceiling like a freed balloon, looking down on himself sitting on the patchwork quilt. There was a mild buzzing nearby, as if he were next to a bee hive in summer. The body on the bed grew smaller, farther away, the room elongating upward like an elevator, an elevator going up into the sky with Bo fastened to its underside and watching as the body on the bed got smaller and smaller. The buzzing roared around him now like a cataract. There came a lurch, as if he had been bumped by a moving vehicle. It did not hurt, but it sent him off into some strange direction so that he was heading down into a dark place. And as he entered the darkness that was like a soft tunnel around him, that was like a soft black tubing that just fit his body, his own voice said,

"Bo, you're dying."

The surge of fear he felt then

added speed to his flight into the dark tube that stretched ahead of him as he sped along. The buzzing sound was left behind now, getting faint as his speed increased through the darkness. Was he going to hell? George Beaumont felt his past life, not seeing it exactly, but feeling it as if it were somehow imprinted on his flesh. Scenes emerged full of sensation, smells, sounds, the very taste of pancakes in the morning at Uncle Day's farm, the smell of the first cow he milked, the feeling of the dive off a tree limb into the summer river, the crying out as he fell from the wagon and the wheel went hard over his arm and broke it, how perfect and pure Mary Louise looked at the wedding, the work in jewelry, the casting, learning to cut precious metals, and the quick flashing scenes of his son, the pregnancy with Mary Louise wailing about death every day and lying always in her bed, how he hoped it would be a boy and it was, and the growing up, softball and flying kites in the valley by the old Duchesne farm, the face that was so like Bo's own that sometimes at night he would go in and look at his son asleep and think it was himself become twelve again, and still he could not say his son's name, even in his hurtling to death or hell, whatever it was, he could not say the name, as if that magic talisman kept the past

somehow secure, prevented that last scene from appearing, the drowned face and his own screaming.

"Oh, Charles!" The scream extended ahead and behind his course through the tunnel like an explosion. He emerged into light so intense that it stunned him. He stopped suddenly, brightness around him like the inside of a star. The agony of his son's name vibrated away from him, radiating like heat from a cooling stone, and Bo felt a peacefulness beginning to replace the agony as he came to rest in the presence of some Being, perhaps in the center of that Being who now understood so completely the processes of living and suffering and dying.

Bo felt the peaceful light surrounding him, and he saw the meadow where he and his son had played baseball, the elms and oaks on the far slope, the barn off to the left and a few Holsteins standing near the fence watching the man and the boy with wonder as they hit the ball and caught it and ran.

But out of the brightness over them, whether it was sunlight or the great Being who was Peace, came a commanding voice that spoke his name in a firm tone, from a great distance but with a command like a gong sounding for the final ceremony.

"George Beaumont."

Bo felt the sucking back in the

darkness, felt the pain coming at him. The fall into weight again snatched him down into the pain so that he screamed as he entered it, like falling into scalding oil. He screamed, and it sounded in the little room where a woman with short, dark hair and great frightened eyes was shaking him by the shoulder, screamed

"Noooooooooooooooo!"

"George! Bo! Come back. Be here, now!"

The woman, who was small and younger than he by almost a generation, hugged his shoulders, stroked his tear-streaked face.

"I saw him."

"Yes, I know. Now come back and live again."

"We were there, in the pasture."

"You're not ready to die yet, Bo," she said, taking his face between her hands and forcing him to look at her eyes. She had large, luminous green eyes; her best feature, she had often been told.

"You're not ready to go yet, now are you?"

"I've got nothing to say about it," he said, clutching his pain to him. "This thing is going to kill me, and all the crazy exercises and not eating anything, and the magic words . . ." He paused, looked at the woman with rage building up in his face, twisting his mouth into a sneer. "All this . . . shit!" he

spat out. "Get away and let me die."

"I won't," she said, her face frightened but her voice steady. "You're doing well, Bo, whether it feels like it or not. You're going to beat it, and it will never come back."

"What do you care," he said, his mouth still held tight. "You keep coming here and checking on me, bringing me that goat food I have to eat." He looked at her as his pain ebbed for a time. He seemed to be trying to see beneath her skin. "I don't even know your name."

"Now, that's better," she said, smiling so that her face fairly radiated. One might have said that, even more than her eyes, her smile was the best part of her visible personality. "My name's Lilliam, with an 'm' at the end, and people who like me and who I like can call me Lilly."

Bo grinned now in spite of himself. Her smile was so happy.

"Well, I'd like for you to tell me if that animal, that thing I made a deal with, is all in my mind? You know what I mean?" He felt embarrassed even mentioning it, but she had to have some connection with it.

"Oh, now you're worried about going crazy. It's real. I know her very well, and she's got your best interests at heart. She really likes people, you know." Lilly had slipped from the bed and was taking things from a string bag she had put

down on the rickety pine table beside the hot plate.

"She? It's a female? What kind of thing is it? I thought it was a lion escaped from a zoo, but I never saw a blue lion and it puts words into your mind."

"I don't really know much about her," Lilly said, stirring a bit of milk and what looked like flour into a pan.

"What's that stuff?"

"It's not ready yet," she said, smiling as she saw his nose wrinkling with disgust at the smell. "But it's going to be yoghurt."

"Ye gods," Bo said. "You already got me doing yoga and now I have to eat yoghurt too." He laughed briefly and was rewarded by a dazzling smile from Lilly.

"But you can't have much."

"Yeah, I know. We're talking to my body, right?"

"That's right, sending messages it can understand. No more cigarettes or cigars or pipes, no more coffee or alcohol, no more meat and especially no salted meat." She made a face that, Bo thought with some surprise, only made her cuter.

"I feel better this afternoon."

He was afraid as he said it, afraid the pain would begin again. He knew it would, that this was only a short vacation during which the world seemed real again and there were other things than his wretched, dying guts.

"You've been getting better right along," Lilly said quietly. "But," and she paused and looked at him with such open sympathy that he almost reached over to touch her. "It's still a long ways to go."

"I just want to know if you think I'm going to make it?"

"I'm sure of it. But it's all got to be gone through if you are to live right afterwards," she said, and he would remember the compassion on her face as she said that, remember it when the pain was so intense he was sure he would die.

"Times like this, I mean, like now when I haven't got the pain, I feel like it might really be true," he said, and in his voice he heard himself that undertone of childish fear. That was why she treated him like a kid. He felt like one, like a poor little kid with a bad pain wanting his mommy to make it well. He decided he would try to get rid of that tone.

"What about you, Lilly?" It was the first time he had said her name, and it sounded strange and exotic to his own ears. "What do you do to stay on the sunny side of the street?"

"Oh I'm just another working girl," she said lightly. "I take a streetcar downtown everyday and put books together. I work in a printing plant."

"You have a family, I guess," he said, trying to remember if she wore a wedding ring. He

hadn't noticed, and now she had her hands in her lap and he couldn't see her left ring finger.

"I live with my folks," she said, and stopped, as if there were something further she did not care to say. "Actually they're my very good friends, Dan and Polly Carruthers. My parents are dead."

He wanted to go on with the questioning, wanted to ask her about boy friends, but he caught himself. He was acting like a man half his age, for crissake. What about his own Mary Louise back in Whitethorn taking care of the house and the bills on his savings, trying to make ends meet and not knowing what was going on or where he was even. He felt a pang of remorse about his wife. She had always tried so hard, and . . . the death had been hard on her too, harder, since she couldn't have any more kids. He *guessed* she couldn't have any more, but that had been pretty much a dumb question for the past few years since they didn't even try much any more.

"Are you feeling OK?" Lilly said, looking at him closely.

"Just thinking about home," Bo said, and at that moment he felt the faintest creeping in of sensation in his side and knew the pain was coming back. He lay back on the bed, his hands pressed to his stomach, ready for it to begin again.

He was startled by a cool, soft

hand on his cheek. "Now, Bo, here's a thing our animal friend told me you should do when the pain gets bad." Lilly's voice went on softly as she stroked his forehead, and although the pain returned inexorably as she spoke, it had that distant quality again, as if her voice were somehow shielding him from its full impact.

He nodded, grateful for her voice, her interest in him, her certainty around him when he himself was so uncertain that he might die just from being uncertain.

Two weeks before Christmas the wind from the northeast stopped and the sky bloomed with cumulus against a pure summery blue. Bo walked out under the empty trees just to breathe the air. It was like spring again in the little square park with the statue of Paul Revere in the center. Feeling convalescent and new as a wet butterfly, Bo sat on an iron bench and watched the armadas of cloud sail away into the north. He thought languidly of a cat sitting in the sun with its toes tucked under and its tail wrapped around. A blessing, that's what it is, a blessing just to be alive.

"You're very good at following the doctor's orders, Bo," the familiar voice said. He turned his eyes that were dazed from looking at the sky.

"Your orders are easy to fol-

low, Lilly." Looking at her smile was better than a whole month of June. "Sit down, take a load off," he said, feeling sheepish and rather shy.

"I've got a present, a special treat," she said, pulling at something in her coat pocket. She brought out a lovely red apple, a Washington Delicious that made Bo's cheeks suddenly smart with saliva. He hadn't eaten real food, he thought, for a month at least.

"Goodness," Lilly said, watching his progress. "I'm afraid when you finish that poor apple you'll begin on me. Such an appetite."

"You'd be hungry too," he said, sucking back the juice, "if you'd been eating no more than enough to keep a sick rabbit alive for a month or more."

But as he finished it, he wondered if the pain would begin, as it had so often whenever he ate anything. It still grabbed him sometimes, though at longer intervals in the past week. Lilly could evidently see the concern on his face.

"I think it'll be OK," she said, wiping at a spot of juice on his chin with her handkerchief. "But you are messy."

"I still can't believe it," he said, sitting back and putting one arm along the back of the bench behind her. "And what am I going to do? I can't just stay here."

"Would you like to go into

Boston, see Paul Revere's house?" Lilly said, seeming to misunderstand.

"No, I mean I just got to thinking again about home and my wife." He felt ashamed for some reason to mention Mary Louise, as if he were being unappreciative or even like a traitor.

"Oh yes, I knew what you meant," she said, her eyes cast down now. "Bo, I'm afraid you'll misunderstand what I'm going to say now."

He felt a sudden weakness in his guts and tensed himself for the pain. But it was only some unfamiliar emotion making his stomach feel butterflies. He could not have said why he felt that way, but an image he didn't understand flashed into his mind: a shy young boy being cajoled by a loving older woman.

"I want you to," and the young woman paused, feeling for words, "to not go home for a while." She looked up at the man's face. "I want you to stay here with me."

Their eyes met then, and the two people on the park bench saw something in each other that made them both look away at the same instant.

"You mustn't misunderstand, Bo," she said. "She wants you to stay until you are really cured, and I, well of course I want you to stay, but it's not like I want you to, to," and she stopped.

George Beaumont felt suddenly more like his own age and realized something of what was going on. He felt a flush of shame at the way he had been acting. What in the goddam hell, he thought. I'm playing the kid here, letting her do all this. He straightened his back, looked at the young woman and grinned.

"Well, what do you say we do take a look around this place? I never been much out of my home state, anyway."

"OK, Bo," she said, and her look was grateful now. "I'm not a native but I can show you some churches and old houses and I know a place where we can get the best Italian salad outside of Napoli."

They took a train into Boston and did a portion of the North End, Faneuil Hall, and the Old North Church, which had announcements in front in Italian, but then Bo was feeling shaky. They found the restaurant where Lilly said he could have one glass of wine and the antipasto with garlic bread, nothing with meat sauce. And Lilly was so comfortable with him that he kept forgetting they were not engaged or married, or going to be.

"Say," he said heartily, "this wine is really givin' me a buzz. You better watch yourself, girlie." But he felt weak. The walking around had worn him out. He had not realized how

weak he had become from the past month of fighting. Yes, he thought, I was fighting for my life. He had to pin his trousers together now and his shirts had to be cinched up at the neck with the necktie or they looked like they belonged to his big brother. He had lost perhaps sixty pounds, and although Lilly said he looked better without the extra weight, it made him feel unaccountably light and strange in his clothes.

"Bo, you really look tired," Lilly said. "Let me call a taxicab to take us back, OK?"

"Hell, we can't do that. It's miles and miles, and it'll cost a fortune." He felt for his wallet. "I got to think about finances, you know." This was a stupid thing to say, what with Lilly buying most of what he had been eating for the past month or so, but he was worried about it. He had money at home, but even though he had brought more than he needed back in November and had wired the bank for more since, he was acutely aware of the money going out and none coming in.

"Sure we can," the young woman said, squeezing his hand. "My treat." She looked so happy to be doing for him that Bo decided to quit being an ass about it all. She wanted to do it, wanted to be saving his life and feeding him, and hell, he needed it. He had always believed in doing things for himself, and now for

the past six weeks somebody had been doing it all for him, and he had been taking it. Well, let it be that way, dammit, he thought. I need her.

One night later on he dreamed again of the beast. In his dream the moonlight filled his room with liquid light. A colorless, shadowless aura seemed to be coming from all sides instead of through the window like real moonlight, and in that mysterious glowing field the beast came stalking into his room on its long blue-gray cat legs. It stood beside his bed, standing straight like a tall woman dressed in blue-gray fur. Now its blunt fingers were unbuttoning the pajamas he had bought at the local Sears Roebuck so he wouldn't look so awful sleeping in his underclothes when she came in, Lilly, he meant. And the beast ran those fingers over him, not just his stomach, but his chest and legs and head, trailing its blue-gray paws so as just to touch his flesh. It left a tingling path along his nerves. He looked down at his naked body and saw traces of light wherever the paw touched him until his body was a series of gleaming streaks as if she had illuminated the arteries and veins, the nerve networks, made the flesh itself transparent.

When he awoke, his head was propped against the headboard as if he had been sitting up all

night. He looked straight out the grimy little window and saw that it was snowing. The room was cold, but he threw back the covers and undid the pajamas to look at his long, gaunt body. He looked for the streaks of light, but of course it had been a dream.

He had just put his feet on the rug when the door exploded with a hail of thumps and knocks. For an instant he was so stunned by the unaccustomed noise that he thought the house must be falling down around him. Mrs. Peavy, the landlady, never knocked, always called out softly did he want his bed made, and things like that. And Lilly sort of scratched, very softly, although he always heard her. But the rain of blows on the door now could only be made by someone who did not know how small the room was, or who thought its occupant was stone deaf.

He swung the door open, prepared to be rude to a vacuum cleaner salesman, and found himself facing three men, two shorter than himself, wearing fedora hats and chewing cigars, the other quite a big man dressed in blue, a policeman.

"Mr. Beaumont, George Beaumont?" said one of the fedoras, the cigar bobbing to the words.

"Yes," George said, bewildered and feeling a twinge of fear in his stomach.



"Anyone else in there?" the other fedora said, pushing against George so that he had to back into the room.

"What do you mean?" George said. "Who the hell are you guys anyway?"

The other fedora pulled a badge from his pocket. "Private Investigator. Rawlins Detective Agency outta Chicago." The badge disappeared into the pocket again.

Bo looked at the big blue uniformed cop, who stood at the threshold like a statue with an apologetic look. "What is this?" he said to the cop.

"If you're George Beaumont," the cop said, "these guys have a warrant so I have to pick you up." He seemed reluctant but determined.

"We know you been having a little . . . ah, shall we say, love nest here with a young lady of anonymous name," said fedora number two. "And we have been engaged by your legal and deserted wife, one Mary Louise Beaumont of Whitethorn, Illinois, to locate your whereabouts and haul your ass back." The man leaned against the wall and gave Bo a sarcastic smile. "That answer your question, big shot?"

He was detained at the police station in Malden for most of the day until he could see a judge and be released on his own recognizance. He was then presented with a subpoena

demanding his presence in court at Rockford, Illinois, on the Thursday after Christmas to answer charges of gross neglect, mental cruelty, and desertion brought by Mary Louise Beaumont in a divorce action. Bo could not believe his eyes when he untangled the legal jargon and understood what was happening. The two private investigators disappeared once the subpoena was served and witnessed, but they left a few parting thoughts for Bo to ponder. One, his wife had a case for desertion if he was not seeing a bona fide doctor here in the East, and if he was not dead by the time the court action came up; and Two, they had gathered evidence of a love tryst (fedora number two called it a "triced") involving George and one Lillian Penfield of the city of Revere, Massachusetts, with pictures of himself and the young lady (as fedora number one said, "pitchin' woo") in a local park.

He was left to find his own way home and had to take a taxi, finally, since he could not figure out which street car went near his rooming house. He arrived late, cold, angry and somewhat stunned to find Mrs. Peavy, cleaning out his room.

"Mrs. Peavy," Bo said to the short, energetic woman making his bed. "I won't be leaving for a couple of days yet."

She spoke without turning around, snapping the sheets

across the slumped bed, "You are."

"I don't understand."

"I say you're leaving, Mister Beaumont." She looked around. "I guess that's your real name? Or is it an alias name you're using?"

"This is all a bad mistake," Bo said.

"Exactly what I'm thinking, Mister Beaumont." Mrs. Peavy turned around, hands on hips, her face red. "That little baggage told me you was her long-lost father, she did."

Bo was stunned again. Her father?

He had to appear in court in a week, which meant he had to leave Malden probably the day after Christmas at the latest to get back by train, since he would have to go the cheapest route possible and would have to find a lawyer. The thought of being in court added to the weight he felt in his head. They would cut him up good in court, especially with the "evidence" those two gumshoes had with their picture of Lilly and him in the park, that innocent time, all the innocent times. And at that, Bo started to get angry. Damn them, they not only wouldn't believe what had happened to save him from dying, they would think he was a middle-aged scoundrel out seducing a young girl, and they hadn't even hardly touched each other, not even a kiss.

\* \* \*

While they rode the streetcar into Boston, Bo filled in what had happened while Lilly listened attentively with an occasional searching look at his eyes. He was a little surprised that she was not more upset at the charges the detectives had made or the fact that he would have to leave soon after Christmas to attend the divorce proceedings. She seemed to have an unshakable aplomb, an attitude of serious attention to all these matters, but one that also said that she considered them of less importance than did the rest of the world.

"You know," Lilly said, looking at him thoughtfully. "It might not be as serious as all that. Your wife may just be telling you that she feels hurt and neglected. I'll bet if you call her on the phone she would listen."

"Yeah, I thought about that, but I don't know if I want to talk to her now." Bo felt bad saying that, but it was true.

"So maybe what's happening is something you really want?"

"What? A divorce? Hell no." Bo sat there watching the Charles River as they crossed the bridge, thinking that at home there might be ice in the river already.

"Are you feeling well now, Bo?" Lilly said softly.

"Sure," he smiled over at her. "It's like all that pain never happened at all. I think sometime it's going to be pretty hard to make people believe that I was

that sick when now I'm all cured."

"You'll have to get along with that, I suppose," Lilly said. "They will say it was all in your mind, or that you had something that only looked like cancer and wasn't. You have to be accepting of their way of looking at it."

"That's something else," Bo said and paused while the trolley bell clanged a number of times. "If you and, and Her, can cure a thing like that, why, you could set up clinics all over and save the lives of thousands of people." He had not thought through what he was saying but went on anyway. "And think of the money you could make. Why you could really make it big, besides saving all those lives."

He was surprised by the look on her face. She seemed almost sad for the first time since he had known her. He felt instantly guilty that he had mentioned such a thing but puzzled too. Why wouldn't it work?

"Bo, it's not the same for everybody," she said slowly. "And I'm afraid a lot of times it wouldn't work out as well as it did in your case."

"You know," he said with new animation, "before, you know, when I was so sick, I felt like an old man." He grinned and put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "And I'm not an old man at all. I'm

only forty-five, be forty-six next month, but that's not old."

He was rewarded by her face losing the sadness and a smile beginning. She reached up suddenly, grabbed his head and pulled it down and kissed him quickly on the lips.

"You're a *young man*," she said, almost in a whisper. "Because you can be whatever you really want to be."

Bo felt as though he had received knighthood. Her lips sent a glow through him so pleasurable that he felt gooseflesh all over his body. He grinned broadly and felt like dancing. What a good day it was, by golly, a good day.

They held hands on the street going from one department store to another. Bo advised her on jewelry, what was a good piece and what was only cheap casting, pointing out well-set stones, and that some costume jewelry looked better than the real thing because it was made with care. And when she was off looking for some napkin rings for a woman friend at work, Bo bought a gold-filled ring with an opal, a tiny one, but as beautiful and fiery as any he had ever seen and set with exquisite care in a ring that must have been made by someone who loved precious metals. It was a great buy, but it took most of his going-home money, and he thought, well, so I have to hitch-hike if Mary Louise won't send

any money, the hell with all that.

It was dark and snowing again when they finished and climbed aboard the trolley to get back to Malden. They had agreed to go to Bo's hotel room to wrap the packages and eat some cheese and crackers and apples they had picked up. Bo was tired. He usually hated shopping, especially Christmas shopping when everybody you knew already had everything they needed and you knew that you, and all of them too, were just out spending money because it was the Lord's birthday. But he had really been interested today, taking such care with everything, arguing with clerks about quality like a housewife, laughing with Lilly about the toys she got for the kids who lived in the other half of her building.

Lilly showed him how to tie a decorative bow and how to make even clumsy packages look neat. He had never cared for wrapping either, but now he found that it was fun, too.

"You're just great, Lilly." Bo looked at her, feeling a lump in his throat. "You really are Christmas."

She put the package down and walked on her knees over to him, put her arms around his neck and leaned back to look at him.

"I think I . . ." He stopped. He had almost said he loved her, and he wanted to say it yet,

but he knew he shouldn't. It shouldn't be that kind of thing, but he felt it was. She was close to him and smelled so good, and she was looking into his eyes in a funny way. He put his arms around her waist and put a little pressure on her. She responded so easily it felt as though she was part of him. Their kiss was long and slow and very sweet.

"Jeeze," Bo said, his breath catching in his chest. "I'm shaking like a little kid," and he laughed a little.

"Bo, I feel very close to you now," Lilly said, looking into his eyes, her head on his shoulder, arms around his neck. "You are becoming a part of my life."

"I don't feel really alive unless you're around," he said, his breath still catching in his throat. "I want to say all kinds of love things to you, but I think it's not right. I mean . . ."

"Don't think about that," she said. And she very deliberately kissed him on the lips again. He felt her small hands on his back, moving in little movements, the fingers spreading and releasing, and he felt her body coming in closer and pressing against his, and then it was no use thinking about anything. He really kissed her this time.

As they lay down on the bed, he started to say something about how he was afraid of doing something wrong to her, but she smiled so sweetly, touching his lips with one finger, that he

stopped. He didn't say a word about anything outside the room for a long time after that.

They made love, created love between them with their feelings for each other that expressed love in their bodies. As if she could feel the exact moment inside him when the climax began, she looked straight into his eyes and her body jumped against his and she cried out with a high gasping, her nails digging into his sides and back, arching against him as she cried out again, louder this time, her mouth open, and he crying out with her, his own climax taking his breath.

And then there was a cry that turned to a growl.

What happened then Bo would never be certain of, but he knew it was not an earthly creature who held him between her legs. The cry became a roar and the claws raked his back and he felt the animal pelt around him as if he had been wrapped suddenly in a close, hot tiger skin. He opened his eyes, his body still jerking with spasms as he climaxed into the woman's body, and found himself wrapped in the great blue-gray beast's embrace, the muzzle full of teeth inches from his face and the growling of the beast making the room reverberate like the lion house at a zoo. He felt his whole body embraced by a creature so much larger than himself, so different from the small

woman to whom he had been making such passionate love, that his mind simply did not reason for those moments. He only felt.

And then it was over.

The beast was gone and Lilly's own soft, feminine body lay with his, her eyes closed, breath coming in long irregular gasps and slowing now. Bo lay beside her, and his mind slowly began coming back. It had been one of those dreams. But he felt a small trickle of blood and looked down at his side where a long scratch ended in a puncture that bled slowly. No fingernail could have done that, and he felt the scratches on his back too. But his happiness could not be shaken, even by the certain feeling that there were three of them in the bed.

A long time later he heard her sigh. "It's not just the two of us, Bo," she said.

"Yeah, I feel that."

"Did you know before?"

"No. Well, I guess maybe I thought about it when I was sick," he said, trying to remember if he had ever come to that conclusion.

"Oh, She scratched you," Lilly said, touching the place on his side that had now stopped bleeding.

"Biggest hickey I ever got," he grinned. "Best too."

She laughed a short little laugh, but then her face became serious.

"You know that I'm not just an ordinary working girl," she said, sitting up and looking at him. "It's real, Bo. I'm afraid you'll think about what happened and sometime later you'll think how horrible it is."

"It's not horrible," he said, seeing the pain come into her face. "It's just something that's part of you." He was not thinking clearly yet, but something in his mind was beginning to feel the unbelievable, the supernatural unreality of his situation.

"I've only been alive for a year, Bo."

"Now wait a minute," he said, a coldness in his throat. "You're younger than me, but not that young." The joke didn't work.

"She's the real one. I'm just something she uses to get along in this world." Lilly held up her hand for him to wait before speaking. "She's kind and good and loves humans, but she's just using me—like a mask or a costume. You know what happened when we made love and when both of us were so, so ecstatic. She couldn't hold onto me because she was enjoying it too. She's always there, with me, some times more than others, but always." Lilly closed her eyes.

Bo tried to listen, but his mind wanted to say that this was nonsense, something they should forget.

"Lilly, this is just dream stuff.

We love each other more than anything, I know that now, and if you've got something—well, wrong, well, we can fix it up or ignore it. You're so sweet and kind and loving." He tried to make his words say what he meant. "You've just got this—problem."

"I'm not a real human being," Lilly said almost in a whisper.

"Don't say that," he said, his voice getting angry. He could not stand the sudden drop into emptiness that she presented. "You're the most real person I ever knew." But at the same time he felt that third presence, not as if he saw it in Lilly, but as if it were there beside him, stretched on the bed, long and blue-gray and terrifying in its power. He knew it was true.

Now the parts were reversed, with her the weak one and Bo the strong one. He was unready to accept it, fumbling in his mind, trying to understand this change to a world different from the one he had always known — and on top of that, this big cat-like thing that he must accept as real.

She went on in a low voice, like a child admitting a fear. "Less than a year ago I stood on the street in front of Dan and Polly's house looking at the number and thinking that I had to make these people like me. And that's the first thing in the world I can remember." She pushed her head away from his embrace to look at him.

"Well, so you've got amnesia or one of those psychological things," Bo said.

"No, it's not that. This beast uses me for something she needs. I'm not angry against her because she's kind, and she healed you, and that's not the first time. Last summer there was a little Italian boy who fell from a fire escape behind the theater, and she made him breathe again and made him live. He was dead, Bo." She looked at him as if there were some thought in her mind she could not articulate.

"She brought a kid back to life?"

"The boy's head was all flat on one side where he hit the pavement and when I touched him he was so limp." She shuddered, holding the sheet tight around her neck. "He's alive now, lives a couple of blocks away from Dan and Polly."

"And she did it for me too," Bo said, thinking back about the dreams. "I used to dream she was in my room at Mrs. Peavy's, and . . ."

"Those weren't dreams," Lilly said. "I remember each time, but I don't know what she was doing or how. I told you things she told me to, the exercises, the diet, and the words to say. She told me all those things."

"But you're the one that did all the work," he said, trying desperately to take the distant look away from Lilly's face. "You

pulled me back when I died, remember? When I saw my son?"

"I never know, really," she said. "Sometimes I think I remember doing that myself, going out of my body to somewhere beautiful and being in the center of a great light where it is so peaceful."

"Yeah, yeah!" Bo said suddenly. "That's what it's like. You've been there too. You must be human because that's heaven, I know it is because my boy's there." He was not aware of making sense or not making sense, only that she looked more like her old self as she tried to remember.

"My birthday party," she said in a low, absent voice.

"Huh?"

"The car, we were all singing 'Alouette' and Rudy was driving," she went on as if telling a story about someone else, her voice growing stronger as she went. "It was my birthday." Her brow furrowed. "I was twenty-one, and we were drinking, drinking from a bottle without a label . . . because even though I was twenty-one . . . I couldn't drink . . . because of . . . prohibition." She looked up at Bo with her eyes round.

He didn't get her meaning.

"Bo! When was prohibition repealed?"

"Why, let's see, a couple years ago. It was in 1933, wasn't it?" He looked at the woman wonderingly. "But there's some states still dry, you know?"

"Bo, I haven't taken a drink of liquor in this year of my life. That's a memory. I know it's a memory," she clapped her hands and grabbed his shoulders and kissed him. "It's a memory from at least four years ago. Do you suppose the beast really has taken me over and I'm a real person with a real life somewhere? Am I just kidnapped?"

He was so happy to see the blankness gone from her face that he would have agreed to anything, but it seemed natural that she would have lost her memory. For that beast to have created her was stretching things too much.

But then she lay down and put her face on the pillow again. She rubbed her palm over the pillow, and he could see she was thinking of something else.

"It won't work, even so," she said. "How can I be real if I *don't* exist when she *does*?"

"Well look, maybe it's just like she, uh, comes over you some way, like you were putting on a coat or something. Maybe it's really you in there all the time. Like what they used to call werewolves and things like that."

She looked up at him, and a smile began to grow around her eyes.

"I'm living now," she said, reaching up to take his face in her hands. "And that's what I'm always telling you to do, isn't it?"

"Sure, and we'll let tomorrow take care of itself, right?" He eased down beside her and kissed her lightly.

"I'm not going to talk like that anymore, Bo," she said into his ear, hugging him to her. "Tonight is for us to enjoy, and tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and we're going to Dan and Polly's house and make turkey dressing and eat Polly's fruitcake and open presents." She moved her body against his. "Would you mind if we loved each other again?"

Bo didn't mind at all.

"I'll never forget this Christmas," Bo said to Lilly at the door. It was after midnight and the Carrotherses had already retired. Outside in the dark the wind began to pick up and the snow grew thicker.

"Do you have to leave tomorrow?" Lilly said, her arms tight around him.

"Yeah. That thing I got to be at is Thursday, and I got to find a lawyer, and the trains are slow. Connections are bad up to Whitethorn."

"When will you be back?" Her voice was so soft he could hardly hear it.

"Right away," he said confidently, feeling at the moment that it ought to be simple. He could get there and get the court stuff over and tell Kneipe that he had to leave town, and then he would come back and look



for a job in Boston or one of the little towns like Malden. Surely somebody around needed a good manufacturing jeweler who could cut stones and engrave and cast and do all kinds of things. He had talked a long time about it to Lilly, and they had agreed it sounded like a good chance. But now as he stood there in the dim hallway, having said his thanks and goodnights to Dan and Polly, and hearing beyond the door the deep moaning of that wind and snow, he had a sudden falling sensation in his stomach.

January 6th 1938

Dearest Lilly,

This is a terrible business going on here. The courts are going to be slow, with no chance of settling things until the end of this month. Old Kneipe down at the store wants me to train a new man, and he isn't too keen on giving me great references because he said I left him in the lurch. You see, sweetheart, they all think I was shamming about being sick, and now they are all down on me for doing that. Well, that's what you said would happen, I guess.

But I'm not down, not really, sweetheart. I'm thinking about how I'll be able to leave right after the court thing is over and I'll come out there again and we'll have such a good time and find a nice place where we can set up housekeeping and be real

people. I want you to get ready for that, Lilly, because I'm so happy about loving you I am really a changed man. There's nothing these people can do to me that will change anything between us. You can bet on that. Please write me soon, and remember, I love you more than anything in the world.

All my love,  
Bo

January 4, 1938

Dear Bo,

I was hoping for a letter again today, but don't think I'm nagging you. It's just that I want to tell you some of the things I've been doing here to get ready for your return. I'm happier than I've ever been, even if that is only a short while—you know what I mean. "She" is restless, and says we may not stay here much longer. I don't understand why she would have to leave, where we would go, but I do catch an ominous note that perhaps I will not be going with her—and there again, you know what that means for us.

Well anyway, I'm looking for apartments closer to Boston, and I've already found a couple of beauties. Each of them is rather expensive, but with both of us working we'll have plenty. I love you very much, and I want you to get back as soon as you can. Think about me, Bo. I love you.

Lilly

January 12th 1938

Dearest Lilly,

I got your letter right after I mailed mine the other day. It was so great hearing from you, sweetheart. I know I'll like whatever set up you decide on, so you go ahead, but remember I can't get there until around the 1st Feb., so don't count on me until then.

There's not much to tell, Lilly. Things are just dragging on here with me sleeping in the back bedroom and taking my meals out and trying to train a young cluck at Kneipe's who can't tell the diff between a graver and a bar of silver solder. Just remember, sweetheart, I love you more than anything. It won't be long now.

All my love,

Bo

I run along the rocky beach every night now since the change began in late December. The wind is always cold and full of icy spray, the rocks covered with a glaze frozen into pinnales and streamers that glitter in the moonlight.

Each night as the moon approaches full, I feel more strongly the call from The Other. What it may be, or from where, I have no more notion than I used to have of my reason for being on earth at all.

That, at least, I know now. The change, or as I feel it inside myself, the awakening, re-

vealed answers to questions I did not know how to ask.

Now. It is almost a voice, almost a name. The image comes of a creature like myself, but as yet unawakened. It sends messages without being aware. It is still unformed, still in love with the sensations of life. I listen. It is the one I must find. I listen to him, his voice alone like the song of some night bird singing in the darkness, his eyes not yet opened. I listen. Soon I will know which way, and then we will go. This is why I am here, the learning and joy are steps to this necessity and the knowledge of where we will go afterward. I listen, the freezing wind ruffling my fur, the voice sings, sings in its own darkness.

January 13, 1938

Dear Bo,

I have to hurry. She's wild to leave and hardly lets me hold the pen. She got a message last night. We have to leave, or she said she will go without me. Oh dear, Bo, I don't know what to do. She said take all the money I had and get a ticket, St. Louis. But maybe further than that. She won't let me finish. I love you. I love you.

Lilly

The train rattled slowly through more suburbs, the snow covered back yards and fences repeating endlessly as the train rumbled over crossings, past

the dinging bells and flashing lights, the cross bars like poison signs drifting past, cars stopped at the crossings with plumes of white exhaust and impatient faces in the frosty windshields. Lilly was too warm in the overheated coach, but she could not rouse herself to take off her coat.

(We have not been in conflict before, Lilly.)

Lilly answered by thinking out the words rather than whispering, as she sometimes did. There were people sitting all around her.

—You are taking me from the people I love, all of them.

(My own necessities must come first.)

—Why do we have to leave?

(It is time, my time to . . . I cannot say the word. It is my time to find another of my kind and to join with him.)

—You are going to mate?

(It is nearly the same as your mating, but we must have achieved a particular stage in our growth. It comes on suddenly, and must be done.)

—Can't you do it in Boston?

(There is only a particular one with whom I can join. We must journey to find him.)

—Well, how do you know he is in St. Louis?

(I do not. But I received a communication last night from that direction.)

Lilly could not hold back the tears now. She tried not to think at all, concentrating on one of

the ritual chants the beast used sometimes to make inner peace. She said the words in her mind, aware that the beast was close to the surface and listening but unable to help her.

—Why are you so kind to other people and so cruel to me? I'm the closest one to you.

(I have been kindest to you.)

—I don't know what you mean. Lilly almost said the words aloud in her growing anger.

(I have given you a year of life.)

—I want to know if I'm a real person. She asked the question suddenly, although it was the biggest question, the one she had never dared to ask. And yet, if this was to be the end of her, if the beast was on its way to some unthinkable coupling with another of its kind, then she might never return to life, never have the chance if she did not ask now.

—Am I just part of your mind?

(When I called you up, you were not what is called real.)

—You mean when the first thing I can remember happened, when I was suddenly standing there outside Dan and Polly's?

(Yes. When I spoke your name for the first time.)

—If I was not a real person, how did you know, how did you . . . make me real? Lilly felt coldness come over her in the hot train coach. If she was not real, if she was only a fabrication

of this creature, then there was no use to even think about Bo, about a life, or about love.

(I called you up from the . . . from what is available in the adjoining space.)

—I don't understand what that means!

Lilly was ready to speak aloud at this point, feeling that coldness inside her and wanting to know, wanting the terrible truth, as maybe Bo wanted to hear from that doctor that he had cancer, just to know it at last.

(It is hard for me to explain to you because you have no concepts for this space except in religious language which is prejudicial. But I will try because I understand your anguish and I share it as I share all of your life, and because I am very sorry that you must return to that place when you do not wish to.)

—Please explain, please tell me about this space.

(It is necessary that you understand that when I tell you, you must accept. You must not attempt foolish actions. You know that I will enforce my control to save myself, that I will call up another Person if necessary?)

—I know. I'll listen. She felt cold in her bones now, seeing with one last desperate memory, Bo's sweet wondering face as they made love.

(I called you up from the newly dead.)

"Oh God!" Lilly screamed. "Oh God!" She tried to stand up in the coach, hitting her head on the baggage rack and unaware of the pain, her eyes wild. "Oh God!" She dropped her open purse and her hands clutched at the woman beside her who thought she was going to be sick and was scrambling out of the seat to make room.

Lilly clawed her way out of the seat and staggered down the aisle, her eyes unseeing, the words sounding in her head now with a warning from the beast inside, a warning that was emotional rather than in words. Take care, it was saying. Take care, or I will replace you. She bumped into the small, frightened-looking conductor, who held her by the elbows.

"Here now, Miss, here now, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

The message got through to Lilly's mind, and unable to do more than stand and look at the little man in front of her, she got enough control to say some words, yes, she was sick, and would he just help her to the ladies' room.

Inside the hot little cabinet, she sat on the stool and breathed deeply, not thinking, breathing in the three-phase movement of the yoga complete breathing exercise, and then she did the tranquilizing breath through each nostril for three times, and at the end of that, her mind came back.

—You tell me I was dead?

(You were.)

—And I'm going to be dead again?

(You will continue in that place from which you were called. And I think now, although I am not sure, that you will wait in that place until I have completed my transition here.)

"God damn you," Lilly hissed between her teeth. "Tell me a straight answer, you filthy monster, you terrible thing that has torn me from death itself, you rotten beast, tell me if I will be dead!" She found herself tearing the handkerchief to shreds.

(It is my belief that you will return to that state. Yes, you will be dead.)

The conditions of the settlement were harsh, modified somewhat by the indignation of his lawyer, Bud Hopps, and the insertion of a saving clause or two modifying the payments for future support of the injured wife. Bo listened as his lawyer read through the clauses one after another, each charge against him, each punitive and cutting phrase turning harmless as it hit against the screen of his abstraction from this foregone event. He kept thinking: Where was Lilly now?

Bud was reading.

"Did you get that, Bo?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"She also gets the contents of the savings accounts, and that's nearly two thousand dollars!"

"Yeah, I thought it was about that."

"Well, Bo, I never thought I'd see you back down from a fight, but Mary Louise has knocked you out of the ring and you're just lying there in the five-dollar seats." The lawyer slapped the long legal forms down on the table. "You're going to be paying this woman the rest of your life. You know that?"

"Yeah, sure Bud. It's all right." Bo was thinking, it's been two weeks now since I heard. I got to do something.

"Well, I guess we're ready," Bud said, lighting a cigarette and sitting down again. "Ready to go in there and come out wearin' barrels."

The following Wednesday, the first of February, as he was getting ready to leave for St. Louis, Bo received a picture postcard. The picture showed a man floating high in the water of a lake while a caption under it said, "Swimming in the Great Salt Lake is easier than lying in bed." On the back was his name and address, and the scrawled words:

Dearest Bo, She can't find the one she's looking for yet. But she's getting ready to change. I won't be here then. I'm so sorry, my darling. Goodbye. I love you always. Lilly

His hands shook as he read the message over and over, trying to make sense out of it, trying to get more meaning from it. What did she mean about getting ready to change? The beast was changing? Or more probably the beast was going to put Lilly aside and change into somebody else.

He felt anger rising in him for the first time since he had been back home, anger at the beast who had saved him from death and now was consigning his sweetheart to oblivion through some unthinkable process it was going through. Why couldn't it just leave her somewhere, just go off and be somebody else and leave Lilly an ordinary human being like anybody in the world? Maybe he could find them, plead with the beast. It was intelligent, though not in a human way. He was moving even before his thoughts were completed, packing his clothes.

The spacious sidewalks of Salt Lake City flowed with a bitter cold wind as Bo walked, suitcase in hand, down from the station toward the business district where he might find a hotel.

After three days he moved to a furnished room farther out, and although that made it harder to get around to the bus and train stations he was checking, he knew his money would not

last more than a week at the rate he paid downtown. He tramped through the snow to five railway stations, two bus depots and an airport, asking each clerk in turn if he had seen a woman who looked like the picture in his wallet. Most said they saw so many people they hardly could remember one of them unless it was a freak or bathing beauty. Bo felt she was not in the city, but he continued asking, hanging around the stations until police officers approached him more than once. When he got up on the morning of the fifteenth of February, he decided to look for work.

He tried the downtown jewelry shops as he came to them, knowing each one as he walked through the door: this one had an excellent watch maker, and this other one specialized in gem-setting and rings, and this one sold mainly silver and plate.

He walked on to the kind of jewelry store he was familiar with. As he entered, a silvery bell rang somewhere in the back and a short, bushy-haired man with round gold-rimmed glasses came from behind a curtain. The shop was smaller than Bo had thought, and he almost turned to leave again, knowing it would be a one-man setup.

The bushy-haired jeweler caught his hesitation.

"What? Not leaving already? You just got here," he said, smiling so that his glasses

seemed to rest on his rounded cheeks.

"I'm afraid I'd just be taking your time," Bo said. "I'm looking for work."

"Where's your sample case?" The small man sat behind a display table and motioned Bo to sit in the customer's chair opposite him.

Bo was put at ease by the man's smile and his easy manner. And it was obviously a slow morning, bright and cold outside this late February day, and no other people in the shop. He sat down and put his hat on the floor beside him.

"There," the jeweler said. "That's better." He offered a surprisingly slender and muscular hand. "My name is Solomon McArdle. And you are?"

"George Beaumont." Bo took the hand, felt the strength in it and liked the man immediately. "I hope you aren't disappointed that I'm just in your shop looking for a job."

"I'm not disappointed yet, Mr. Beaumont, but then I don't know what you do, how much money you want to do it, or if I will like it."

"Well, I see you've got a one-man operation going here, and I was thinking of getting into one of the larger places, really," Bo began. The little man's eyes were remarkably bright and protruded somewhat so that he looked almost comical when he was being serious. Perhaps that's

why he smiles so much, Bo thought.

"You are so apologetic," Mr. McArdle said. "What you have to sell is not good?"

"I'm a manufacturing jeweler," Bo said, realizing he was making a terrible impression. "I have done everything, engraving, lost wax casting, cutting and setting gem stones of all qualities. I can do any of the usual things and do them well."

"My goodness, and all this walks into my shop one cold morning and offers itself to me." Mr. McArdle lifted both his hands in mock surprise. Before Bo could take offense, the little man smiled again. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yeah, I would," said Bo, who was conserving money by eating only two meals a day now.

As McArdle got up he said, "You are not in the Church, then."

"The Church? Oh, you mean the Mormons?"

"The Saints, they call themselves," McArdle called from behind the curtain. "They are all Saints out here." He reappeared with two cups of coffee and set them on the table. "I knew you were a stranger by your coat and your voice," he said.

"So, you are looking for work in this depressed country?"

"I had a good job back in Whitethorn, Illinois," Bo began, but he stopped and tried to look busy with the coffee.

"But you ran off with a tray of diamonds and now you are in Salt Lake City," McArdle said, but he was smiling.

"I got a divorce," Bo said. "I, ah, wanted to just get away and start somewhere else. I came West."

"Yes, the marriage problems," McArdle said. "It makes us run around like squirrels in their little wheels." He smiled again. "And so, we make the world turn, is it not so?"

Bo liked the little bushy-haired man and felt a pang of good feeling inside, realizing he had not sat and talked with a friend for a long time.

"Yeah, that's the truth," Bo said. He looked around at the small neat shop, the familiar smells of rouge and solder coming from behind the curtain. He felt he would like to get back to work, to work hard and not to have so much time to think. "I'd really like to get back to work."

"I can see that, Mr. Beaumont," McArdle said with a new, kindly note in his voice. "I will tell you what the situation is here," he said, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. "I have two shops in this city, and this one is the small one where I sometimes come to do custom work. I am not usually here in the morning, since my woman, Mrs. Wright, opens for me and takes the trade until early afternoon." He watched Bo's surprise and smiled. "You

thought this was a little bitty shop, like a corner grocery?"

"Yeah, I know a guy has a shop like this in Rockford. He has a hard time making it." Bo was puzzled now, because the appearance of the man seemed to say that he was a small-time operator.

"We all have our hard times in these days, but it is getting better now." McArdle slooped his coffee. "I think you might be a gold nugget that I am about to pick out of the street, Mr. Beaumont. Will you do something for me on trial?"

In the days that followed, Bo found himself sinking almost with pleasure into the work McArdle laid out for him. He began with the simple things and put his heart into the least little jobs, not because he wanted to impress his boss and new friend, but because it comforted him. He felt each morning a little better, able to feel human again, to walk out in the large park near his furnished room and around Temple Square at night when they turned on the floodlights and it looked like a castle in the clouds. He felt some purpose moving again in his mind, and while he never stopped thinking of Lilly and never stopped looking for her in every way he could think of, waiting for news of her from somewhere, he began to live again. ■



With the help of science, dreams may come true. Here is the poignant, fascinating, and altogether believable account of a dreamer's adventures in early Africa.



*Photo by Geri Bishop*

# NO ENEMY BUT TIME

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**by Michael Bishop**

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## CHAPTER ONE

LOLITABU NATIONAL PARK,  
ZARAKAL  
JULY, 1986, TO FEBRUARY, 1987

**F**or nearly eight months Joshua lived in a remote portion of Zarakal's Lolitabu National Park, where an old man of the Wanderobo tribe taught him how to survive without tap water, telephones, or cans of imported tuna. Although hunting was illegal in the country's national parks, President Tharaka granted a special dispensation, for the success of the White Sphinx Project would depend to an alarming extent on Joshua's ability to take care of himself in the early Pleistocene.

Despite having lived his entire life among the agricultural Kikembu people (Zarakal's largest single ethnic group), Thomas Babington Mubia had never given up the hunting arts of the Wanderobo. In 1934 he had taught a callow Alistair Patrick Blair (today a world-renowned paleoanthropologist) how to catch a duiker barehanded and to dress out its carcass with stone tools chipped into existence on the spot. Now, over half a century later, Blair wanted his old teacher to communicate these same skills to Joshua—for, although considerably slower and not quite so sharp-eyed, Babington had lost none of his basic

skills as stalker, slayer, and flint-knapper.

Babington—as everyone who knew him well called him—was tall, sinewy, and grizzled. In polite company he wore khaki shorts, sandals, and any one of a number of different loud sports shirts that Blair had given him, but in the bush he frequently opted for near or total nudity. Welts, scars, wheals, and tubercles pebbled his flesh, in spite of which he appeared in excellent health for a man belonging to *rika ria Ramsey*, an age-grade group that had undergone circumcision during the ascension of Ramsey MacDonald's coalition cabinet in England. For Joshua the old man's incidental bumps and cuts were less troubling than a deliberate vestige of that long-ago circumcision rite.

*Ngwati*, the Kikembu called it. This was a piece of frayed-looking skin that hung beneath Babington's penis like the pull tab on a Band-Aid wrapper. It hurt Joshua to look at this "small skin." He tried not to let his eyes shift to Babington's crotch, and, for reasons other than Western modesty, he did his darndest not to shed his shorts or make water within the old man's sight. He was half afraid that to be looked upon naked by Babington would be to acquire *Ngwati* himself.

Until his circumcision Joshua's mentor had attended a mission

school run by Blair's Protestant Episcopal parents, and he knew by heart a score of psalms, several of Shakespeare's soliloquies, and most of the poems of Edgar Allan Poe, a great favorite of the old Wanderobo's. Sometimes, in fact, he disconcerted Joshua by standing naked in the night and booming out in a refined British accent whichever of these memory-fixed passages most suited his mood. In July, their first month in the bush, Babington most frequently declaimed the lesser known of two pieces by Poe entitled "To Helen":

*"But now, at length, dear  
Dian sank from sight  
Into a western couch of thunder-cloud;  
And thou, a ghost, amid the  
entombing trees  
Didst glide away. Only thine  
eyes remained.  
They would not go—they  
never yet have gone.  
Lighting my lonely pathway  
home that night,  
They have not left me (as my  
hopes have) since."*

Sitting in the tall acacia in which he and Babington had built a tree house with a stout door, Joshua looked down and asked his mentor if he had ever been married.

"Oh, yes. Four times all at once, but the loveliest and best was Helen Mithaga."

"What happened?"

"During the war, the second

one, I walked to Bravanumbi from Makoleni, my home village, and enlisted for service against the evil minions of Hitler in North Africa. I was accepted into a special unit and fought with it for two years. When I returned to Makoleni, three of my wives had divorced me by returning to their families. I was Wanderobo; they were Kikembu. Although Helen was also Kikembu, she had waited.

"We loved each other very much. Later, a year after the war, she was poisoned by a sorcerer who envied me the medals I had won and also my Helen's Elysian beauty. I lost her to the world of spirits, which we call *ngoma*. On nights like this one, dry and clear, I know that she has fixed the eyes of her soul upon me. Therefore, I speak to her everlasting world with another man's poignant words."

This story touched Joshua. He could not regard Babington as a ridiculous figure even when, during the arid month of August, he stood one-footed in the dark and recited,

*"Hear the sledges with the  
bells—*

*Silver bells!*

*What a world of merriment their  
melody foretells!*

*How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night! . . ."*

Nights were never icy in Lolitabu, which was tucked away in Zarakal's southwestern corner. Instead of bells-on-bobtails

you heard elephants trumpeting, hyenas laughing, and maybe even poachers whispering to one another. Babington took pains to ensure that Joshua and he never ran afoul of these men, for although some were woebe-gone amateurs, trying to earn enough money to eat, others were ruthless predators who would kill to avoid detection.

The big cats in the park worried Joshua far more than did the poachers. They did not worry Babington. He would walk the savannah as nonchalantly as a man crossing an empty parking lot. His goal was not to discomfit Joshua, but to school him in the differences among several species of gazelle and antelope, some of which had probably not even evolved by early Pleistocene times. Joshua tried to listen, but found himself warily eyeing the lions sprawled under trees on the veldt.

"We do not have an appetizing smell in their nostrils," Babington told Joshua. "The fetor of human beings is repugnant to lions."

"So they will not attack us unless we provoke them?"

Babington pushed a partial plate out of his mouth with his tongue, then drew it back in. "A toothless lion or one gradually losing its sense of smell might be tempted to attack. Who knows?"

"Then why do we come out here without weapons and walk

the grasslands like two-legged gods?"

Said Babington pointedly, "That is not how I am walking."

During this extended period in the Zarakali wilderness Joshua dreamed about the distant past no more than once or twice a month, and these dreams were similar in a hazy way to his daily tutorials with Babington. Why had his spirit-traveling episodes given way to more conventional dreaming? Well, in a sense, his survival training with Babington was a waking version of the dreamfaring he had done by himself his entire life. With his eyes wide open, he was isolated between the long-ago landscape of his dreams and the dreams themselves. He stood in the darkness separating the two realities.

One day Babington came upon Joshua urinating into a clump of grass not far from their tree house. Joshua was powerless to halt this process and too nonplused to direct it away from his mentor's gaze. At last, the pressure fully discharged, he shook himself dry, buttoned up, and turned to go back to the tree house.

"You are not yet a man," the Wanderobo informed him.

Joshua's embarrassment mutated into anger. "It's not the Eighth Wonder of the World, but it gets me by!"

"You have not been bitten by the knife."

It struck Joshua that Babington was talking about circumcision. A young African man who had not undergone this rite was officially still a boy, whatever his age might be.

"But I'm an American, Babington."

"In this enterprise you are an honorary Zarakali, and you are too old to live any longer in the *nyuba*."

The *nyuba*, Joshua knew, was the circular Kikembu house in which women and young children lived.

"But, Babington—"

But Babington was adamant. It was unthinkable that any adult male representing all the peoples of Zarakali should proceed with a mission of this consequence—the visiting of the *ngoma* of the spirit world—without first experiencing *irua*, the traditional rite of passage consecrating his arrival at manhood. If Joshua chose not to submit to the knife (which Babington himself would be happy to wield), then Babington would go home to Makoleni and White Sphinx would have to carry on without his blessing.

On a visit to the park in early September, Blair learned of this ultimatum and of Joshua's decision to accede to it—so long as Joshua could impose a condition of his own.

"I don't want a Band-Aid

string like Babington's," he told the Great Man. "I think I can put up with the pain and the embarrassment, but you've got to spare me that goddamn little casing pull."

Blair assured Joshua that educated Kikembu, especially Christians, also regarded *Ngwati* with distaste, and that Babington would not try to make him keep the "small skin" if Joshua were vigorously opposed to it.

"I am," said Joshua, but he neatly parried the Great Man's many well-meaning proposals for sidestepping the circumcision rite altogether. He felt he owed Babington, and he wanted to earn the old man's respect.

Apprised of Joshua's intentions, Babington declared that the ceremony would take place two days hence, in the very grove where he and his protégé had their tree house. Blair then informed Joshua that in order to prove himself he must not show any fear prior to the cutting or cry out in pain during it. Such behavior would result in disgrace for himself and his sponsors. Moreover, to lend the rite legitimacy, Babington had sent messages to several village leaders and asked Blair to invite some of the Kikembu from the outpost village of Nyarati as on-lookers. Once the knife glinted, they would applaud Joshua's steadfastness or, if he did not bear up, ridicule his public cowardice.

"Onlookers!"

"It's traditional, I'm afraid. Of what point are the strength and beauty of a leopard if no one ever sees them?"

"Of considerable point, if you're the leopard. Besides, we're not talking about leopards. We're talking about my one and only reproductive organ. Onlookers be damned!"

"They're for purposes of verification, Joshua."

"Maybe Babington ought to circumcise a leopard, Dr. Blair. I'd love to see them verify *that*."

"Now, now," said Alistair Patrick Blair. "Tsk-tsk."

Joshua spent the night before his *irua* at the park's sprawling Edwardian guest lodge with Blair. At dawn he bathed himself in a tub mounted on cast-iron lion's paws, donned a white linen robe, and, in company with the paleoanthropologist, set off for his rendezvous with Babington aboard a Land Rover driven by a uniformed park attendant.

They arrived in the acacia grove shortly after eight o'clock and found it teeming with young people from Nyarati, men and women alike. The women were singing spiritedly, and the boisterous gaiety of the entire crowd seemed out of proportion to its cause, the trimming of an innocent foreskin. Blair pulled off Joshua's robe and pointed him to the spot where the old Wan-

derobo would perform the surgery.

"You're not to look at Babington, Joshua. Don't try to watch the cutting, either."

"I thought that would be part of proving my manhood."

"No. Rather than being required, it's prohibited."

"Thanks be to Ngai for small mercies."

Naked and shivering, he entered the clearing beneath the tree house, sat down on the matted grass, and averted his face from the ladder that Babington would soon be descending. Blair, his aide, could offer him no physical assistance until the rite was concluded.

The songs of the Kikembu women, the bawdy masculine repartee at his back, and the anxious hiccupping of his heart isolated him from the reality of what was happening. This was not happening to him. Only, of course, it was.

Then Babington was there, kneeling before him with a knife, and Joshua put both fists to the right side of his neck, placed his chin atop one fist, and stared out into the savannah. The cutting began. Joshua clenched his teeth and tightened his fists. Doggedly refusing to yip or whimper, he caught sight of a pair of tourist minibuses rolling over the steppe from the vicinity of the guest lodge. That morning while boarding the Land Rover, he recalled, he had seen

them parked inside a courtyard next to the lodge. Somehow the tour guide had learned of the approaching ceremony. When the minibuses pulled abreast of the acacia grove, clouds of dust drifting away behind them, Joshua wanted to scream.

The faces in the windows of the two grimy vehicles belonged primarily to astonished Caucasians, many of them elderly women in multicolored head scarves, out-of-fashion pillbox hats, or luxurious wigs much too youthful for their wearers. The cutting momentarily ceased. Passengers from both vans dismounted at the outer picket of trees and filtered inward to stand behind the swaying and ululating Kikembu women.

"Jesus," Joshua murmured.

"Hush," cautioned Babington. "Or I will deprive you of much future pleasure and many descendants."

A portly, middle-aged tour guide with a florid complexion used a megaphone to make himself heard over the singing and hand-clapping Africans.

The cutting had begun again. Joshua shut out the man's spiel to concentrate on the waves of pain radiating through him from the focus of the knife.

The eyes of the female tourist nearest the guide, Joshua noticed, had grown huge behind her thick-lensed glasses. She was a stout ruin of a woman whose magenta head scarf re-

sembled a babushka. Her body appeared to sway in time with those of the svelt, graceful Africans. Her swaying and the guide's ceaseless patter distracted Joshua from the pain of the circumcision rite.

"Finished," Babington announced.

"Don't leave *Ngwati*," Blair countered. "Remove it, please."

Babington snorted his contempt for this command, but swiftly removed the offending string of flesh.

In celebration of the successful *irua*, a chorus of voices echoed through the grove and across the steppe. Now Joshua could look down. He saw blood flowing from him into the grass like water from a spigot. Blair steadied him from behind and wrapped the immaculate white robe around his shoulders.

Now people were dancing as well as singing, extolling the initiate's courage as they wove in and out among the trees in a sinuous daisy chain of bodies. Some of the tourists had joined the conga line, and the two groups, Africans and foreigners, were suddenly beginning to blend. The Kikembu waved their arms in encouragement, and more tourists—sheepish old white people—snaked their way into the celebration.

Joshua, fearing that he would faint, held the front of his robe away from his groin to keep from staining the garment. The

woman with the magenta scarf approached him from the edge of the grove and addressed him in the flat, Alf Landon accents of a native Kansan:

"I'll give you twenty dollars for that robe."

Joshua gaped.

"Tell him twenty dollars for the robe," the old woman commanded Blair. "Another five if he'll let me take a Polaroid. Our tour guide said to ask before I took a Polaroid."

"Mrs. Givens!" Joshua exclaimed. "Kit Givens from Van Luna, Kansas!" He had last seen the old woman at his grandfather's funeral fourteen years ago, when she had occupied a rear pew in the stained-glass, apricot-and-umber ambiance of the First Methodist Church. She was seventy-two if she was a minute. Her withered cheeks and chin were tinted all the iridescent colors of a mandrill's mask.

"I've never seen him before," Mrs. Givens told Blair, as if sharing a confidence. "I don't know how he could know my name."

"You pulled my hair in my grandfather's grocery when I was a baby."

The old woman rallied. "You're an impudent little nigger. I wouldn't pay you five dollars to mow my yard."

Defiant despite his weakness, Joshua doffed his robe and handed it to Mrs. Givens. "Here. I want you to have this. Take it

back to Van Luna—the sooner the better."

Mrs. Givens took the robe from the bleeding man, backed away from him clutching it, and turned again to the paleoanthropologist. "You'll walk me back to the tour bus, please. I've never met this man in my life."

"Of course, Mrs. Givens."

As Blair directed the old woman through the rowdy throng to the bus, Babington helped Joshua climb the ladder into the tree house. Many of the Kikembu from Nyarati had brought banana leaves to the ceremony, and the old Wanderobo had already arranged the leaves into a pallet upon which Joshua could rest without fear of exacerbating his wounds. His penis would not stick to the banana leaves as to linen or other sorts of bedding, and the wounds would therefore heal more readily.

Lying on this pallet, Joshua saw Babington's creased face staring down at him. A face that seemed to have been created in the same way that wind sculpts sand dunes or rain erodes channels into the hardest rock.

"Everyone wants a piece of the sacred," Joshua whispered. "Even if it isn't sacred. Dreaming makes it so, and the dreaming goes on and on until it's a habit."

"Go to sleep, Joshua," the old man said.

\* \* \*



At first it disturbed Joshua that he was taking so long to heal, but Babington explained that he himself had suffered intense pain and then a throbbing tenderness for well over a month after his *irua*. By mid October, just as his mentor had predicted, they were stalking game again, digging tubers, picking fruit, and diving ever deeper into wilderness lore. Joshua's glans was no longer so sensitive that simply to urinate was to conduct electricity. He was himself again.

Joshua paid attention to Babington's lessons. He learned how to alter his upright silhouette by tying foliage about his waist, how to move on a wily diagonal while stalking game, how to club a sick or wounded animal to death without exhausting himself or making an ugly mess of his kill, and how to eat raw meat, birds' eggs, and insects without nausea or qualm. The time in Lolitabu passed quickly.

On the night before Joshua was to return to Russell-Tharaka for additional study—text-book and simulator work, with reviews of the paleontological information he had digested last spring and summer—he awoke and went to the door of the tree house. Babington, silhouetted on the edge of the grove, was reciting from Poe:

*"Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,*

*In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream."*

## CHAPTER TWO

"An inability to distinguish between waking and dreaming may be a valuable index of madness, or it may be a gift."

I am in the African country of Zarakal taking part in an experiment—a mission, I ought to call it—that would not be possible without my talent as a dreamer. The American physicist Woodrow Kaprow has just strapped me into an apparatus suspended inside a closed vehicle resembling a windowless omnibus.

This large vehicle rests on the outer edge of an ancient stretch of beach about four hundred feet from the southeastern shore of Lake Kiboko, one of several large lakes in East Africa's Great Rift Valley. We have positioned the omnibus according to Alistair Patrick Blair's calculations. Blair has cautioned Kaprow that Lake Kiboko in early Pleistocene times had a more extensive surface area than it does today, and that if the omnibus is parked too close to its twentieth-century shore, I am likely to emerge from my next spirit-traveling episode into several feet of tepid,

brackish water. *Kiboko*, Blair has reminded us, means hippopotamus, but crocodiles also cotton to this great lake, and my life would probably be forfeit even if I did not drown. Therefore, we have left ourselves a margin for error.

Outside, the sun is rising. It is July, and very hot. Inside, however, a pair of interlocking rotary blades have begun to spin just above my outstretched body; the breeze they make evaporates the sweat from my forehead. Kaprow hunches inside a bell-shaped glass booth punching buttons and flipping switches. I can see him if I turn my head, but he has asked me to lie completely still, close my eyes, and concentrate on the recorded human heartbeat drumming in my earphones. The hypnagogic rhythms of this sound will soothe me toward slumber and induce the kind of dreaming necessary to shift my body into the Early Pleistocene.

"You're drifting," Kaprow intones. "You're drifting, Joshua. Drifting . . ."

I am at the eye of a compact hurricane, the toroidal field generated by the rotors. Waking and dreaming begin to interthread. Although my eyes are closed, my inward vision brings me images that alternate between a primeval landscape of gazelles and the twentieth-century interior of the omnibus. Pretty soon these images are

coterminous, and I am in two places at once. In the throes of dream I drift for nearly two thousand millennia.

At last the rhythm of the heartbeat ceases, and I open my eyes to find that the rotors above my scaffold have almost stopped turning. The booth in which Kaprow has monitored my dropback appears to be empty; its transparent hood has taken on a decidedly smoky cast. The trouble of course is that Kaprow has remained in humanity's consensus present whereas I have retreated to only Ngai knows precisely what year. (For Ngai presides over the Kikembu spirit world.) The inside of the omnibus exists at a set of temporal coordinates different from those of the remainder of the machine, and my dreaming has been instrumental in effecting this dislocation. Glancing about bewilderedly, I apply a tentative forward pressure to the control beside my hand.

This control maneuvers my scaffold up and down on the pneumatic struts attaching it to the ceiling. Obediently, then, the scaffold begins to drop through a bay in the floor of the vehicle. The rotors that have half-encircled me remain where they are, like a bird cage that someone has cracked open on the edge of my platform. I am being hatched into a "simulcrum" of our planet's prehistory.

Blair and Kaprow have planned my exit wisely, for when I emerge from the belly of the omnibus, I do not descend into a solid mass of rock or find myself forty feet above the surface with no easy way down. No, indeed. The ground is only a body length below me. For the present, though, I gaze upward into a column of space furnished with the arcane equipment that has helped me make this transfer. The rest of the omnibus—the tires, the chassis, the body—is utterly invisible, for it exists in material fact only in the final fifth of the twentieth century. Briefings and simulations have not prepared me for the *weirdness* of this effect, and I peer into this hovering hole in the Pleistocene sky like a fretful Alice regretting her introduction to Wonderland.

Although I missed the lake, what sort of splash did I make in that ancient timescape?

Initially, not much. Had there been any sort of fashion-conscious creature there to observe my arrival, though, it would have had to regard me as the Beau Brummell of hominids. Although I was still in harness (on the apparatus that Kaprow called the Backstep Scaffold), I had brought with me not only the clothes on my back but several changes and a small cornucopia of survival items. The point of all this gear was to keep

me alive for the duration of my mission, which was supposed to last anywhere from two weeks to a month.

In addition to my gear I had at least three other things going for me before I jumped from the scaffold to the ground. First, Air Force doctors had immunized me against every conceivable East African disease and several inconceivable ones. Second, I had spent eight months in the Lolitabu National Park with the old Wanderobo warrior Thomas Babington Mubia undergoing wilderness training. And, third, I had visited this same untamed epoch thousands of times in my dreams. I could never believe that I might die in this distant realm of *ngoma* or spirits.

I unfastened my harness, removed my earphones, and pulled away the electrodes taped to my temples and brow. After easing myself to a sitting position, I surveyed the landscape and jumped. The Beau Brummell of hominids debuting in an era of sartorial barbarism. I took my red bandanna from my pocket and tied it about my neck, thinking that surely it imparted to my diminutive figure a dashing, even piratical air. As if anyone here—and I saw no one—gave a damn. Despite being armed, or perhaps because of it, I felt like a paratrooper who has landed miles and miles behind enemy lines.

Beside me, a dazzling tur-

quoise in the morning sun, the lake. It was larger than its twentieth-century self; a brief jog would have carried me into its shallows. The lake's oddest feature today was that, Joshua Kampa aside, it had no constituency. Despite its name, Lake Hippopotamus entertained no boisterous or sunbathing riverhorses. No skittish herds of gazelles or wildebeest braved its open shoreline to slake their thirsts, and not a single crocodile knifed through the languid waters looking for breakfast. An eerie emptiness reigned.

Turning to the east, I found that the mosaic habitat of savannah, bush, thornveld, and gallery forest afforded a similar glimpse of the native wildlife. None. No birds in the sky, and no animals out there among the trees and grasses. The wide, rolling plain was vacant, and the range of gentle, faraway hills over which the sun was now rising looked as uninhabited as the highlands of the moon. Had the project code-named White Sphinx translated me to primordial Pangea rather than to preadamite Africa? I was utterly alone. For the first time in my life I did not know whether I was waking or dreaming!

From the breast pocket of my bush jacket I took the hand-held communicator that was supposed to establish instantaneous contact with my colleagues in the twentieth century. A

transcordion, Kaprow had dubbed it. Its *modus operandi* involved a piezoelectric correspondence among the crystals in the microcircuitry of each matched pair. Kaprow had the mate to mine, and, theoretically, all I had to do to communicate with him was type out a message on my instrument's tiny keyboard.

Previous tests, with travelers who had dropped back only a century or two, had shown the transcordions to perform reliably even under adverse weather conditions. Eventually, therefore, Kaprow had convinced himself that the size of the temporal gap separating a pair of transcordions had no bearing at all on their effectiveness. The energy expenditure involved in sending me to the Pleistocene had not permitted us to test this hypothesis in my case, however, and I quickly learned that Woodrow Kaprow, Genius Extraordinaire, had figured wrong. Marconi, Bell, and Edison no doubt had their off days, too.

But for those who collect First Words, Last Words, and/or Pithy Epigrams, here is the first message I fed into my transcordion: *"That's one small leap for a man, one giant step backward for humanity."* It pleased me to be typing rather than speaking this message—because I did not have to fear that radio static would garble my words and perhaps obscure or delete the altogether crucial article in my first clause.

Kaprow did not reply.

Maybe he had not found my opening gambit amusing. I got serious: *"The lake seems to be dead, and the landscape is barren of all life but vegetation. Dr. Blair was right in assuring us that I would be visiting a wetter, more hospitable period, though. The desert of Zarakal's Northwest Frontier District is no desert this morning. It's a big, gone-to-seed golf course with woods, sand traps, water hazards, and overgrown fairways. The absence of wildlife scares me. It's going to be impossible to shoot a hyrax here, much less a birdie or an eagle."*

I gave Kaprow a good five minutes to register and digest this information, but still he did not reply. I grew uneasy. Perhaps the enormous span of time separating the physicist and me had affected the transcordions. If it made for a small time lag between sending and receiving, well, that would entail inconvenience, certainly, but not catastrophe. Astronauts, after all, have to cope with this phenomenon. Why not a chrononaut, then?

Walking a few steps along the shore, I keyed in this: *"The past FEELS different, Dr. Kaprow. At least to me. It's not a matter of misaligned geographies or molecules twisted sideways, really. It's even different from my perception of the early Pleistocene in my spirit-traveling episodes. Let me see if I can explain."*

After clearing the transcor-

dion's display area, I tried to explain: *"When I was small, probably about ten or so, I was thumbing through a science book when I came across a strange photograph. It showed a canary submerged on its perch in an aquarium. The bird was actually in the water, it was wet, and there were guppies and gold fish swimming around it. How neat, I thought, how neat and how weird. It reminded me of my own terrible out-of-placeness in my dreams."*

My display area was nearly full. I cleared it again, knowing that Kaprow's unit was connected to a printout terminal that would preserve my messages on long sheets of computer paper. For portability's sake, of course, my transcordion had no such attachment, and Kaprow was therefore limited to messages of exactly ten lines at sixty-five characters a line. So far, though, he had not said, "Boo."

I typed: *"You see, that canary was inside a cubic foot of water sheathed by an oxygen-permeable membrane of laminated silicon. The canary was wet, but it could breathe. It was existing in an alien physical medium. It looked bewildered, but it was existing, Dr. Kaprow, and that's more or less the way I'm experiencing the past. The past feels different, but it's not impossible to breathe and think here. . . . Does that give you any idea what the past feels like?"*

This time I waited. Surely, by now, Kaprow would have had

time to receive and to respond to at least the first of my messages. I wanted his or Blair's advice about the absence of wildlife. Maybe I had leapt into the wrong past, and maybe our only viable course was to abort the mission.

No, I was not going to abort the mission. We had talked about the possibility of failing to establish or losing transcordion contact, but always with the tacit understanding that neither of these dreadful eventualities would befall us. The latter had occupied a bit more of our discussion time—after all, I could drop the transcordion on a rock or lose it in a streambed or forfeit it to an envious and overbearing baboon—but because the transcordion was an instrument capable of withstanding a great deal of physical abuse, and because I fully understood its value, we had entertained the possibility of this danger only as a dutiful intellectual exercise.

*"DAMN IT, KAPROW! ANSWER ME, PLEASE!"*

Our contingency plan was simple. In the event the transcordions failed, I was to assess my situation and either abort or continue the mission according to my intuitive assessment. If I opted to go ahead, I was to return the Backstep Scaffold to the interior of the omnibus (in order not to leave an anomalous hole in the prehistoric atmosphere) and come back to this lakeshore site at least once a day. At reg-

ular intervals Kaprow or one of his technicians would lower the scaffold so that I could either reject the invitation or clamber aboard for a trip back to the twentieth century. The appointed times for these rendezvous were dawn, noon, and sunset. Kaprow did not want to leave the scaffold out at night for fear of retracting into the omnibus's sensitive interior some rambunctious representative of a Pleistocene primate species. At all costs, it was necessary to avoid monkey fur in the works. Finally, Kaprow had dictated that I was not to remain longer than a week without direct transcordion contact.

Reaching over my head, I pushed the control on the scaffold and watched it withdraw upwards through the bomb-bay doors of the omnibus. When these doors swung shut, hermetically sealing the guts of the time machine from Pleistocene eyes, the sky was whole again. I stood alone on the lakeshore; half-seen electric twinklings filled the air around me, like a caroling of microscopic fireflies. This phenomenon lasted only a moment or two. Staring at the place where the hole had been, I reflected that if anyone in the twentieth century successfully broke into the omnibus's equipment hold, the vehicle would either blow apart or lose the temporal pressure sustaining its prehistoric atmosphere. A vio-

lent explosion was the more likely of these two events, according to Kaprow, but in either case I would have to live out the remainder of my life in this desolate, primeval setting.

### CHAPTER THREE

Birds, wheeling birds.

From the western edge of Lake Kiboko, in the lee of the ramparts on that side of the Rift, there lifted a glittering cloud of birds. Cormorants maybe, or kingfishers. They were too far away to identify easily (even with my combination reduced-print Bible and field guide), but in spite of the distance I believed that they were reacting to my presence in their world. Their appearance above the lake legitimized my arrival. In fact, it seemed to me that I had somehow *summoned* these birds into existence.

The past was awakening.

Suddenly the lakescape was alive.

Not forty feet away, a crocodile—a moment ago merely a ridge of pebbly earth beside the lake—slithered into the water. Beyond the crocodile, a family of hippopotami, submerged almost to their nostrils, were taking their ease in the weed-grown shallows. These animals were members of the extinct species

*H. gorgops*, immediately recognizable by their periscopic eyes. . . . Ah, but language plays tricks on me. How could they be extinct when I saw them snorting and yawning like living engines? I, not this family of riverhorses, was the anachronism here.

Never one to surrender without a fight to the fallibility of tomorrow's technology, I took out my transcordion and keyed in this message: *"I'm home, Dr. Kaprow. This is the destination foretold for me in thousands upon thousands of spirit-traveling episodes. It's inhabited, this place, and I'm one of the inhabitants."*

Then I typed, "Wow." And waited for a response that never came. And put the transcordion back in my pocket.

Well to the south a small herd of rather shaggy antelopes—they looked overdressed for this latitude—was tentatively approaching the lake. I thumbed past Revelations all the way to Ungulates and confirmed that they were either waterbucks (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*) or their early Pleistocene equivalents. A solitary bull with a pair of impressive ringed horns led his harem down to the beach, and cows and several yearlings spread out along the shore and nervously lowered their muzzles.

Overhead, a flight of flamingoes on their way to another Rift Valley lake or maybe another

part of this one. They were rose-pink against the lightening sky, gangly and graceful at the same time.

Returning my attention to the waterbucks, I was stunned by the quickness with which death struck a calf that had ventured too far out. A crocodile—maybe even the one I had just seen slither off the beach—lunged from submarine concealment and seized the hapless calf by the throat. As the surviving waterbucks bolted in terror for open country, the croc's viselike jaws dragged the calf into deeper water. Crimson began to marble the turquoise surface of the lake, and although the family of hippos bathing just west of me remained blithely indifferent to the slaughter, I had to turn aside. My survival training with Babington should have inured me to such sights, but until now I had not really believed that the matter-of-fact savagery of African bionomics would prevail in my objectified dream world. I had been wrong, of course, and the rapacity of the crocodile was not only the young waterbuck's comeuppance but mine as well.

Fear had survival value. It could prevent me from falling victim to complacency my first day on the job.

To make myself less conspicuous, I thought of following Babington's advice and strapping a bit of foliage about my middle, but dismissed the idea because

none of the wildlife grazing or browsing within a hundred yards of me seemed especially agitated by my passage. For a moment or two I thought I might be invisible to the animals here, but a small herd of zebras (*Equus grevi*, today a relatively rare species) blocking my way into a thicket of fig trees dispelled this idiot notion by pricking up their ears, flicking their tails, and stampeding away to the south. Because I was walking into the sun, they had seen me before I had seen them, and my presence on the plain had moved them to exercise that immemorial escape clause, flight.

Cautiously, I entered the fig-tree glade. No lions or cobras lay in wait, but I did find evidence that it had not always been uninhabited. A small midden of bones and lava-cobble flakes suggested that under one tree a group of tool-using hominids had butchered a small antelope of some kind and feasted on its carcass. Bits of fur snagged on the underbrush or ground into the sandy floor of the stream dissecting the thicket told me that the kill had taken place within the last year or so. I examined the stones scattered about. Obviously imported from elsewhere, they included lumpish core tools and the splinters fractured from them by the industrious bipeds. Hunger had prodded the creatures to this cunning labor, but so cheap and



easily duplicable were its products that they had abandoned the implements upon abandoning the glade. I knelt beside the broken rib cage of the antelope and practiced knapping flakes from a polyhedral core tool.

This was something that Blair and Babington had taught me during my eight months in the Lolitabu National Park. The resulting tools—call them awls, or scrapers, or burins—were not so serviceable as the various scissors, toothpicks, tweezers, and corkscrews concealed in the bright red handle of my Swiss Army knife; however, they did not cost me thirty-five bucks, either. One of these tools was sufficiently acute to make an incision (accidental) across the toe of my left chukka boot.

Dutifully, I took out my transcription: *"Firm evidence of hominids only a half-hour's walk from the lake, Dr. Blair. Small midden with tool remnants and animal remains. Wish you were here."* And, this time, put the instrument away without waiting for a reply.

Although not yet noon, it was very hot, and I was sweating feverishly from my work with the lava cobbles. At the eastern edge of the fig-tree thicket I looked out across the grasslands at the hills I had seen from the lake. From these hills, wooded corridors stretched out into the savannah like the spokes of an enormous shell. Although Blair,

the expert, had made many of his hominid-related discoveries in the fossil beds near the lake, I decided that the modest upland region was as likely a habitat for protohumans as any other. I based my decision on my past spirit-traveling and on years of intensive reading to explicate my dreams. If Mary Leakey, Alistair Patrick Blair, and Don Johanson had made no important finds in the uplands, the reason was not that hominids had never lived in them, but that erosion, predators, and volcanism had more successfully obliterated the signs of habitation there. It would take a couple of hours of walking to reach the hills, but I intended to go there. If I wanted to explore the haunts of habilines—that is, representatives of the near-human hominid family known as *Homo habilis*, a species first named and championed by Louis S. B. Leakey—I would have to seek them out and demonstrate for them the full range of my charms and accomplishments.

Ladies and gentlemen, Beau Brummell is on his way.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I saw my first hominids—if not habilines—only a few minutes after entering a strip of forest wedging into the savannah from the eastern hills.

Heavily built creatures with wide faces and massive jaws, the australopithecines had been grubbing for insects and foraging desiccated fruit. There were five altogether, four of whom beat a swift retreat into denser foliage. The remaining hominid was a male, his penis a mere nub in the Brillo pad of his pubic hair, his scrotum as round and intricately puckered as a rotten grapefruit. A pronounced crest ran fore and aft over his skull, like the wedge of a Mohawk haircut.

Fascinated, I decided to reveal my presence.

Despite my six-inch height advantage—he was probably about four feet, nine inches tall—for nearly a minute the male stood his ground, aggrievedly eyeing me and making rumbling noises in his throat and chest. This he did to cover the escape of the others, who had already completely disappeared. Then, having accomplished his purpose and satisfied the demands of honor, he, too, turned and gimped away into the undergrowth.

I was still not alone. From the branches of the surrounding trees a throng of bandit-faced monkeys, probably vervets, had watched my run-in with the australopithecines. Ill-tempered elves in black face, they leapt about excitedly, scolding and anathematizing me. I had chased off their big bipedal cousins.

Moreover, I was like nothing they had ever seen before.

"Quiet down, fellas," I told them. "You'd better get used to this turn of events. *A. robustus* is going the way of five-cent cigars, 33 rpm records, and Cadillac convertibles."

Startled by my voice, the vervets quieted: I got no more response from them than I had from Woody Kaprow over the transcordion. If *A. robustus* had not survived, I asked myself, what were *my* chances?

Kaprow had not permitted me to drink or eat for the twelve-hour period prior to my drop-back, and although I had been running all morning on will power and adrenalin, I had just about depleted my reservoirs of both. Besides, the sun told me that it was lunchtime. Not wishing to shoot a vervet—though their manners did not really warrant clemency—I gathered leaves from several different kinds of acacias and made myself a dry, unappetizing salad. I found water trickling through the mulch cover in the glade and drank long and hard to dislodge the pulpy residue of leaves adhering to my teeth. The meal was not very satisfactory, but I was not yet ready either to kill an antelope or to exploit the limited resources of my survival kit.

As I hiked deeper into the forest strip, sweat poured off me. My Right Guard had long since failed, and I was beginning to

ture. After divesting myself of my backpack and slinging my epaulet of nylon rope down beside it, I slumped to the ground for a breather. A tree trunk was at my back, and although the savannah was visible through the foliage to the southwest, I had no real apprehension of the carnivores out there. I was at risk certainly, but I was also so rare a creature that, simply by being a rarity, I felt I generated a kind of armor about myself.

I rested my hands on my stomach, closed my eyes, and felt myself drifting . . . drifting . . . drifting into dreamland. . . .

Someone touched me. I opened my eyes and saw her. Acting on its own, my hand went to my hip and unbuttoned the flap on my .45's leather holster. The lady who had prompted this reaction—by every appearance a protohuman creature—retreated a step or two into the shade of the acacias, but did not bolt like the skittish australopithecines I had met earlier. My stomach flip-flopped, and I tried to get to my feet.

She watched me. How, two million and six years after our first meeting, to describe her? Well, even as my forefinger fumbled for my automatic's trigger, I noticed that she had uncanny self-reliance and poise. The fact that she was carrying a hefty club in one fist underscored this observation, but did

not occasion it. She appeared to be about four inches shy of five feet tall and too lithe of build to throw her weight around effectively—a diminutive, sinewy Black Beauty. Her beauty was to me

*Like those Nicean barks of yore  
That gently, o'er a perfumed  
sea,*

*The weary, way-worn wanderer bore*

*To his own native shore. . . .*

This poem crossed my mind, I think, because Babington had recited it repeatedly during our last two or three weeks together in the Lolitabu National Park. From the first, then, I called the creature who had awakened me in the prehistoric woods Helen—not so much after the Helen of Homeric legend as after the enduring passion of an old Wanderobo warrior who had once been married to a woman by that name. This distinction is important, for although I recognized the individuality of Helen Habiline's beauty almost from the outset, I saw it in an African rather than a Western European context.

She appeared to be clad in the creation of a horny furrier. A girdle of fur covered her lower abdomen and loins, but her breasts and upper thighs were so lightly haired that the ebony smoothness of her flesh shone through. The hair on her head was hyacinth, wiry, and fly-away, almost as if she had

grabbed an uncombed fright wig from a department store mannequin—but her eyes sparkled like ripe black olives and her nose was fierce and generous. Her everted upper lip curled backward over a set of prodigious uppers, teeth like unpainted casino dice.

She scrutinized my clothes with intent interest—from the red bandanna about my neck to the rubber-soled chukkas encasing my feet. When she cocked her head to one side, I had the unnerving impression that, with an effort of superhabiline concentration, she was mentally disrobing me. What kind of body did I have under the strategically arrayed skins cloaking my back and loins? Although she had never met a fop before, Helen clearly understood that my togs were accessories rather than outlandish extensions of my person. She tried to see through them to me.

I took off my bandanna and held it out to her. "Here. If you want it, it's yours."

Her eyes widened at the sound of my voice, but she did not accept the bandanna, merely studied the way it dangled between my fingers. Then she retreated another step or two.

"Joshua Kampa at your service. I've come in peace for all mankind. Womankind, too, as far as that goes."

At this point Helen raised her club, showed me her enviably

powerful teeth, and erected the short hairs on her shoulders and upper arms. This response nonplused and frightened me. I gestured placatingly with the bandanna, but she pivoted, glanced at me over one muscular shoulder, and, imparting a pretty swivel to her steatopygic fanny, stalked eastward through the undergrowth. A ridge of dark fur ran down her spine to the small of her back, but there was only enough hair about her anus to defend her when she sat upon the ground.

Helen was indisputably a member of the hominid species for which I had once invented a black-hand-with-eye symbol for use in my dream diary. A representative, in other words, of the species that paleoanthropologists call either *Australopithecus habilis* or *Homo habilis*. Alistair Patrick Blair preferred the former term because he had pinned his hopes of winning the earliest-near-human-ever-discovered sweepstakes to the coccyx of a dubious creature called *Homo zarakalensis*. To my mind, though, Helen had to be considered human, and the term I preferred then—and still prefer today—is *Homo habilis*.

The specimens of *A. robustus* who had fled from me earlier were mere apes by comparison to Helen. The fact that she had come out exploring on her own also told me something about

her character; i.e., that she possessed a degree of independence typical of many well-adjusted, adult human beings. She did not mind taking acceptable risks; she did not mind acting, upon occasion, entirely on her own. A baboon, an australopithecine, or even a chimp would never have ventured so far afield without at least one confederate near to hand for moral support.

Looked at in another light, however, Helen's independence argued *against* her categorization as an advanced hominid. Our immediate ancestors, Blair had taught me, were gregarious creatures, craving companionship and the approval of their peers. A loner among such buddy-buddy primates would have been an aberration, for her people would have lived in a social unit where the ethos of a loner could contribute only uncertainty and disruption. This chain of reasoning led me to conclude that Helen was indeed an aberration among her kind, but probably in a positive rather than a pejorative way. Judged against the standard of her fellow habilines, she was more rather than less human. She had her eye on the angels.

Why was she out alone? Two possible reasons presented themselves. First, maybe she had got fed up with the demands of habiline togetherness and retreated to the woods to

commune with her—dare I propose it?—soul. Second, maybe she had struck off by herself on a mission meant to benefit her entire group, in which case she would have been a patriot rather than a misanthrope, and hence an aberration with a certain grimy social cachet. If this second hypothesis proved out, why, Helen and I had something significant in common.

I struck off in the direction she had gone.

Within a mile I came to a clearing in the gallery forest, where woods and savannah abutted each other on the slope of a hill. Between two fingers of forest, at the point of a V-shaped web of grass, a modest hominid culture flourished. To my astonishment, on my first day I had found a bona fide habiline "village." Three crude dwellings—with stone bases, curved sapling supports, and haphazard thatchings of brush—occupied this little nook, and I gaped at them like a man who has stumbled upon a McDonald's at the summit of a remote Himalayan mountain. None of these structures would keep out a heavy rain or deflect a howling wind, but they were clearly capable of providing shade during the day and a sense of womblike security at night.

Damn my broken transcor-dion. Here was confirmation that the habilines had built shel-

ters similar to those of contemporary hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari and elsewhere, but I could not report the finding.

I named this village Helensburgh.

Having arrived just ahead of me, Helen hooted to announce her return, and through the holes in the haystack huts I saw dark bodies responding to her oddly musical call. Several females and children spilled out into the V-shaped clearing from the huts, while others appeared from the edges of the woods. Because of my impeded view and their incessant movement, I estimated that at least fourteen or fifteen habilines had turned out to welcome or waylay their prodigal Amazon. Helen had status among these people. What kind of status, however, I could not yet say.

My next surprise was that she towered over the adults in the village by as many inches as I towered over her. Standing among them, she might have been the queen of a race of delicate pygmies. All her subjects, though, were matrons, ingénues, or children, some of these last so small and downy that they resembled teddy bears or upright vervet monkeys. A couple of the younger women had clutching infants in their arms. This was civilization of a kind, a civilization in miniature, and I hung back to keep from disrupting its workings. I felt like

a barbarian spy before the sack of Rome.

Having just named the village Helensburgh, I decided that Helen's people needed a name, too, something descriptive but far less formal than *Homo habilis*. As members of the family Hom-inidae (of which all-conquering *Homo sapiens sapiens* is today the only surviving species), they led me willy-nilly to the nickname Minids.

During my childhood in Kansas and Wyoming, people speaking to my mother about me would often say, "Why, Jeannette, he's no bigger than a minute." I was still small, but Helen's diminutive people were even smaller, and I relished the idea of confronting all my mother's old friends with the news that, yes, I was finally bigger than a Minid. For the first time in my life, in fact, I was tall.

The Minids quickly disabused me of the notion that Helen was their queen. After ascertaining her identity, one grizzled matron waved an arm at Helen (revealing a ridge of hair from her armpit to the underside of her wrist), chattered high-pitched imprecations, and furiously shook her head and mouth. Bored, the children eventually wandered away, while the two mothers with infants sat down on the grass to poke and dandle them. Helen endured this scolding for two or three minutes, occasionally glancing at the gal-

lery forest with a vacant expression, but finally tired of the game and lifted her club over the old woman's shoulder to signal her weariness. Even though this gesture looked as much like a salute as a threat, the harridan ducked her head, turned sideways, and, bending deeply, exposed the enlarged *labia minora* of her genital region, a pink satin slipper.

Rather indifferently, Helen touched her club to the old woman's tail bone, forgiving and dismissing her with the same gesture. Then she ambled off to another section of the clearing. Here she squatted and relieved herself. No one paid her any further mind, and the object of her parodic knighting went chattering back into her hut as if nothing had happened. By briefly assuming what primate ethnologists call the presentation posture, the harridan had both truckled to and appeased Helen. She had also underscored the ambiguity of Helen's status among the Minids, for Helen was a female whom the other adult females treated both as a wayward sister (the scolding) and as an unattached adolescent male with formidable physical strength but no real community standing (the presentation posture).

It was entirely possible that Helen had forgotten me the moment her back was turned, and that her disregard of my pres-

ence had enabled me to follow her back to Helensburgh. I did not like to think that her endocranial volume was so slight that it denied even a few out-of-the-way brain cells to my memory, but I could not ignore this possibility. Maybe I was nothing to her because I had literally made no impression on her understanding. A painful hypothesis.

Inwardly denying it, I watched her and the other habiline villagers go lackadaisically about their business—which seemed to consist primarily of half-hearted foraging and a vigorous loafing.

The Minids—a band of approximately twenty-five, if I counted in the adult males who had probably been out scavenging or hunting—had their capital at the overlap of two of the habitats of the East African mosaic: savannah and gallery forest. Because bush country, hills, and lakeshore territories also lay close by, the Minids were well situated to exploit a number of different food sources and survival modes. Still, I had not expected to find half of such a band taking its ease at midday without a single sentry.

Eventually I decided to withdraw from the encampment. If the males came back and found me ogling their women and children, I might find my visit to the Pleistocene cut short by their intolerance and outrage. At this early stage in my explorations,

it was best to avoid arousing either suspicions or tempers.

I spent the last twenty minutes before nightfall gathering brushwood, antelope chips, and stegodon patties for a fire. The malicious lavender sunset pitched over into darkness about the time I was piling this fuel at the base of a kopje—that is, a broad outcropping of granite on the steppe—about a half mile from the lake, where I had gone to avoid the gathering animals. I lit the brushwood and dried animal droppings with a match from my Eddie Bauer stove-cum-survival-kit, then scooted high up onto the outcropping to enjoy my bonfire. Nocturnal predators would be instinctively wary of the blaze, and there was no way for them to leap up behind me from the plain. Plenty of fuel, and an impregnable position—I was set for the night. Although I finally realized that I had eaten only once that day, my fatigue disciplined my hunger pangs and I abstained from a brief hunting trip into the savannah.

It was a long night, almost interminable. I could not let myself drift off, into a deep sleep—into dreams of my own far-future past—for fear the fire would go out.

In the morning I realized that I had lived almost an entire twenty-four-hour period in the early Pleistocene. I had made prehistory. None of Kaprow's

other volunteers had ever gone back even a thousandth as far, and only the physicist himself had remained longer on a single dropback than I had already been on mine. It struck me that there ought to be a party hat, a magnum of champagne (a domestic variety would do nicely), and a bullroarer in my survival kit. There wasn't even a pineapple Danish. To celebrate my accomplishment, I would have to hunt up my own breakfast and down it with gusto.

That was when I heard an otherworldly singing reverberating over the steppe, like the cries of disembodied saints. It came from the hills to the east, from the general vicinity of Helensburgh. I got to my feet and cocked my head to listen to it. A wordless canticle of untrained habiline voices greeting the dawn. An aubade, call it. It was heart-breakingly fervid—not sweet or pristine, but rough-edged and full of raw conviction. An anthem.

The habilines—humanity's ancestors—were singing.

After ten or fifteen minutes the singing stopped. Although I should have returned to the lake, I kept waiting for the singing to resume. Yesterday, apparently, I had arrived too late to hear it. The impression this singing left on me—a kind of awe, a tingling in my nerve ends—took a while to wear off.



A short time later I arrived at the head of the Minids' V-shaped clearing and squatted like a breakwater between the fingers of forest pointing into the savannah. The Minids had already caught wind of me, and three or four children who had been tumbling in front of the huts together stopped to see what I was doing. An elderly male hooted to his younger compatriots in alarm. Struggling to control my pounding heart, I dug nonchalantly at the grass. I examined individual sprigs, turned over rocks, sniffed my fingers appraisingly.

By this time every Minid in Helensburgh, including its eponymous queen, was watching me.

In fact, Helen had joined the males in their cautious war party. I saw her, club in hand, tiptoeing toward me along the left-hand side of the clearing. The males were spread out in a sagging U, moving slowly but methodically forward. I tried not to betray my nervousness.

The menfolk closed on me more menacingly, the hair on their shoulders erect. Helen's intentions appeared no more friendly than did those of her male counterparts. She fell in behind a macho *hombre* with a tangled black beard and the astonishing tonsorial discrepancy of a Thin Man moustache. This dude, the largest in the band, was almost certainly the Minids'

*alpha* Romeo, for which reason I had already mentally dubbed him Alfie. Helen, however, had at least an inch in height on him, and it was interesting to note that she had not waited for his okay to join their assault group, a fearsome juggernaut of nationalistic feeling.

I stood up. I raised my hands. Because I was taller than the herbivorous australopithecines with whom they shared a portion of the bush-and-savannah habitat, the Minids stopped. Further, I was as nimble on my feet as the habilines. Come the crunch, fear and adrenalin fueling me to victory in spite of my chukka boots, I felt sure I could do a Jessie Owens on even their fleetest and most tenacious sprinter. For now, though, I spread my arms and showed them I was holding neither club nor stone.

The habilines, renewing their approach, stalked to within fifteen or twenty feet of me, perilously near. Reluctantly, I unsnapped my holster, drew my pistol, and pointed it skyward. A single warning shot would probably send them scrambling for cover, but it would also set back my hopes of cementing a relationship of mutual acceptance and trust. In the face of this dilemma I began to talk, spilling out the Pledge of Allegiance, the Preamble to the Constitution, the entire text of a Crest toothpaste commercial,

several nursery rhymes, and the lyrics to a goldie-oldie popular song, all in soothing, confidence-inspiring tones that I hoped would resolve the crisis in my favor. For a moment or two they listened attentively, then flashed one another a series of significant looks whose meaning—"Attack!"—I somehow intuited.

Desperate, I began to sing. I sang in a rich, lilting tenor, and I sang with feeling:

"A day ago

I had a lovely row to hoe.

Where did it go?

Oh, all has changed, and rearranged,

From but a single day ago. . . ."

The sound of this plaintive melody spilling from my lips gave my attackers pause. Or maybe it was not so much the music itself—a simple ditty, heartfelt and direct—as the sheer unexpectedness of my singing it for them. Singing was even better than eating scorpions as a proof of my hability! Although virtually spellbound through the second refrain, my audience began tiring of my performance. Exchanging a series of rapid glances and hand gestures, they resumed closing in on me. Their faces made it easy to decide what to do for an encore.

I fired my pistol.

The effect was dramatic. Three of the males fell to the ground

as if I had poleaxed them, two others ran into the woods, and a sixth beshat himself and dove sideways with his arms over his head. Still in front of me, dazedly crouching, were Helen and the steadfast Alfie. In Helensburgh itself, a pandemonium of shrieks and gibbering had broken out among the women and children, but this died away quickly as they hurried for shelter. With their menfolk routed, however, who would defend them? I was cutting a decidedly Genghis Khannish figure, but my assumption of this autocratic role gave me no pleasure. I had probably blown my chance of achieving a workable detente with the Minids.

Extending one hand, I took a step or two toward Helen and Alfie. They backed away. The remaining habiline males rolled over, leapt up, and hightailed it for the huts, there to make a stand if I chose to pursue them. The fellow who had lost control of his bowels oared himself backward over the grass, scraping fecal matter from his derriere, while the warriors who had run into the forest returned to see what was happening. A brave people. My pistol shot had signaled a shift in the balance of power in almost the way that the explosion of an atomic device over Hiroshima had signaled a similar alteration between the Allies and the Japanese. At least, however, I

had fired a warning—I had plenty of bullets.

"I'm not going to do it again," I assured Helen and Alfie. "That was to save my life."

But they, too, withdrew to their huts, where, among a congregation of fuddled, uncertain faces, they stared at me as if I were Death incarnate. When I made no move to press my advantage, two or three of the males began gesticulating with their clubs, hooting belligerently, and indulging in ridiculous swagger, their hackles lifted along their shoulders and their chests puffed out.

In the thicket to my right, however, a young Minid male was scrutinizing me with almost chilling calm. He had large, limpid eyes and a professorial dignity. He and Alfie seemed more dangerous foes than the vain-glorious gasbags dancing about before the huts, and I decided to get out of Helensburgh to avoid having to shed anyone's blood.

"Goodbye," I told them. "Look for me to make this up to you. All in all, I'm not such a bad dude. Goodbye . . ."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Our contingency plan demanded that I be present at lakeside every sunrise and sunset for the possible extrusion of the Backstep Scaffold, a stipulation

that cut down my range and frustrated my efforts to observe Helen's people. This demand was doubly difficult to observe because the scaffold did not appear. Nevertheless, after missing my first sunrise assignation, for the entire following week I honored my end of the bargain and showed up at lakeside even when irritably certain that my colleagues in the twentieth century would fail me again. Still, I did not believe that I was permanently stranded. Kaprow and his assistants were experiencing "technological difficulties," bugs that they would undoubtedly overcome in time, and time was Kaprow's private bailiwick.

In fact, I began to believe that maybe my apprehension of time differed in some significant way from that of my White Sphinx colleagues. Maybe, because of the sheer temporal distance of my dropback, my sunrises and sunsets no longer corresponded to theirs. Eventually, I decided, Kaprow would figure that out, and the scaffold would appear—seemingly out of thin air—exactly when it was supposed to. In the meantime, though, I would abandon the lake in order to give the habilines my full attention, returning at the end of another week to see if I had surmised correctly. After all, getting to know the protohumans was what I had come for.

For the next couple of days after this decision, then, I

mounted dogged forays on the Minids to press my suit. They did not react well. Although they no longer tried to drive me away, they would not tolerate my presence within forty or fifty yards of the huts. To make me keep my distance, they hurled figs, mongongo nuts, berries, tubers, clumps of dirt, and stones. I had hoped to make an inroad in their concerted resistance by plying two or three of the younger habilines with sugar cubes and gum sticks from my survival gear, but the children would not let me approach them, and the mothers of the Minid teddy bears were extremely conscientious about keeping them close to hand.

I am not going to detail here the piddling hardships I suffered (dysentery is not a pretty topic), or the dangers I passed (not all of them in my stool), or the fabulous menagerie of quadrupeds, serpents, and birds that I either befriended or ate (if not the one before the other). Nor am I going to recount my daily chores in the acacia thicket—from washing clothes to gathering firewood to burying my garbage (which last task I scrupulously performed to discourage the visits of a host of four-legged trash collectors, most notably the giant hyenas). Instead, I want to tell you what I learned of the Minids while still trying to gain admittance to their clannish hearts.

First, I found that between, say, ten in the morning and the hour before sunset, the males and the females often went their separate ways. Blessed or encumbered with children, the women—on days not expressly devoted to dawdling—occupied themselves accumulating berries, birds' eggs, beetle larvae, scorpions, melons, and other easily portable foodstuffs, all of which they carried in crude bark trays or unsewn animal skins. With their children in tow and an armed male nearby to hurry them back into the woods if danger threatened, the women skirted the edges of the savannah. To benchmark their progress through the bush, and to maintain contact with one another, they babbled, cooed, and scatsang as they foraged. Usually they gave way in silence to a herd of elephants or a pride of lions or a pack of giant hyenas. If, however, the interlopers were lesser hyenas, baboons, wild dogs, or robust australopithecines, the women were as capable as their male counterparts of raising a diversionary ruckus or a spirited defense of their foraging domains.

Three or four times I contrived to tail the womenfolk, but I was no more welcome a tag-along than a flasher on an outing of Camp Fire Girls. Once aware of my presence, they invariably shrieked and hurled things at me. The stain imparted

to my bush shorts by the albumin of a well-thrown guinea fowl's egg remained set in the fabric to the day I gave them up for lost.

Helen never went on these excursions. She had no child, and the womenfolk, though generally tolerant of her, were uneasy when she was about. Instead, Helen went hunting with the males.

These hunts took place on the savannah, where, if ever I climbed off my belly, I was unable to disguise myself effectively. I saw either a great deal or almost nothing. It did become clear to me, though, that the Minids not only tolerated Helen among them but frequently put her in a position to deliver the *coup de grâce* after a well-coordinated stalk. Under my astonished gaze she battered down a warthog and a duiker. Often good for two or three days' eating, these kills released the Minids from the burdensome need, if not the nagging desire, to hunt—so that I sometimes had nothing to do but sit in my tree and reread Genesis. The Minids, meanwhile, stayed in Helensburgh and feasted.

What progress was I making? Very little, it seemed. The best construction I could place on my relationship with the habilines was that I was no longer a stranger to them.

I recognized by sight each one of the adult Minids. In addition

to christening the band's obvious head-honcho Alfie, I had assigned the following monickers to its remaining menfolk: Ham, Jomo, Genly, Malcolm, Roosevelt, and Fred. Ham and Jomo were the two oldest Minids, if their creased faces and salt-and-pepper manes were reliable indices of age. Genly was the habiline who had given me so intense a scrutiny after the fateful pistol-shot incident, while Roosevelt was the unfortunate soul whose sphincter muscle had betrayed him. Malcolm, a fellow with a red-black goatee and pencil-point eyes, had served as sentry the day I discovered Helensburgh, and Fred was the youngest of the hunters, a hobbit with a permanently dislocated jaw and wide gap in his front teeth—as if, in bygone days, he had run afoul of one of his elders' more emphatic fits of pique.

The ladies I named in this wise: Dilsey, Guinevere, Emily, Miss Jane, Odetta, and Nicole. Dilsey and Guinevere were the consorts of, respectively, Ham and Jomo. Guinevere was the harridan who had given Helen such an extended tongue-lashing on my first afternoon as a spy. Since that time I had developed a more favorable opinion of her. In fact, I had even begun to suspect that she was Helen's mother! Emily, Genly's wife, struck me as the inveterate sexpot among the distaff Min-

ids, a lady with a roving eye and a wandering backside. She was Alfie's favorite, although he, too, apparently appreciated a carnal smorgasbord. Miss Jane, Odetta, and Nicole had made a single distinctive impression on me: they were excellent mothers, tenacious in their children's defense, amiably feisty in their dealings with the menfolk.

As for the children, I had not yet familiarized myself with all of them beyond the point of assigning names. The oldest among them, probably Dilsey's offspring, was an adolescent male whom I called Mister Pibb. Thereafter the children, toddlers, and babies got mixed up in my mind, but the names I eventually wrote on the genealogy page of my reduced-print Bible and field guide included Jocelyn, Groucho, Duchess, Bonzo, Pebbles, Zippy, Gipper, and A.P.B.

A.P.B. was Fred and Nicole's baby. His initials stood alternately for Alistair Patrick Blair and All Points Bulletin, which last name he earned by the shrillness of his demands to be given suck.

Twenty-three habilines in all (for I had been counting the Minids). I was their first cousin, two million years removed, come home for a visit, and they refused to acknowledge me. I was also beginning to wonder if I had become a nonentity to my colleagues in the dream territory

of the twentieth century. Perhaps, for them, I had never existed. . . .

Since my arrival in the Pleistocene, it had not rained. Obviously, it had been dry for quite some time. Recently, however, this lack of rain had provoked the migration of many herd animals—gazelles, wildebeest, zebras, and several species of protoantelope—out of the area. Although the food-gathering techniques of the Minid females probably accounted for two thirds of what the band actually ate, the absence of meat on the hoof would eventually work real hardships on Helen's people, primarily by depriving them of a vital supply of protein. Mongongo nuts were rare in this part of Africa; and if the smaller game animals—guinea fowl, hares, warthogs, monkeys, hyraxes, and water birds—followed the example of the ungulates, why, the Minids would soon be facing down the ghastly spectre of Famine.

And so would I.

The prospect excited as well as disturbed me. A change for the worse in hunting conditions might prove my best opportunity to win friends and influence habilines.

During this fallow period, the Minids compounded their problems by missing several kills and allowing a pair of aggressive lionesses to drive them off an-

other. It struck me that I could improve my status by demonstrating my talents as a breadwinner. I would make my reluctant cousins a present of an animal large enough to keep them well fed and sassy for two or three days. To that end, I went out one morning before dawn, before the ritualistic choiring of habilines, and walked in the cool half-dark all the way to the edge of Lake Kiboko. By the time I arrived the sun was rising, marbling the eastern horizon with delicate rose and salmon. The lake itself was a vast looking-glass of turquoise.

I drew my .45 and crouched on a lava flow above the southeastern shore.

At which moment, glancing sidelong, I saw that the Backstep Scaffold from Kaprow's omnibus was hanging in space like a mechanical variation on the Old Hindu Rope Trick. My pulse quickened, and I leapt to my feet. Here, if I wanted it, was rescue. Even after all this time, Blair and Kaprow had not forgotten me. They had solved their Technological Difficulties. Peering upward, I approached the scaffold, startled anew by this window into deliverance. I was tempted, too. It would be so easy to chin myself into position, strap myself in, push the control retracting the scaffold, and dream myself back into the bosom of a world of double-digit inflation and percale bed sheets.

Who could say, in fact, if I would ever get another chance?

Then I boosted the platform back into its spacious aerial womb. The sky was whole again, and I had reduced my morning's various options by one. Quite a significant one. I felt better for having done so, too. My entire life had pointed to this mission, and I was not about to abort it simply because a drought was threatening my habiline cohorts and me with hard times—especially now that I knew I could, with a little luck, get home.

I resumed my vigil at lakeside. Fifteen minutes later I shot a small, lone antelope of a species unknown to both me and my field guide—the creature had a copper-colored pelt and graceful, corkscrewing horns—and dragged it away from the wafer's edge to prevent its being purloined by a crocodile. After gutting the antelope, I hoisted its lolling carcass to my back. My plan was to carry it over the intervening grasslands to Helensburgh, lay it sacramentally before the Minids' citadel, and thereby earn their undying gratitude and respect. This was a heroic scenario, but because I had fully envisioned it, I expected it to work.

The trip back to Helensburgh, however, did not go as I had foreseen. As I staggered along, the body of the dead antelope grew progressively stiffer and heavier. Also, as part of my re-

volving alert for hyenas, wild dogs, and other potential da-coits, I made myself turn about in a circle every thirty or forty yards. Unhappily, about two hours into my journey, just as I was beginning to believe in my ultimate if not my immediate success, my conscientiousness paid off in a sighting. Some distance off, sharkishly patrolling the steppe, a pack of giant hyenas trotted toward me from the northeast.

"Oh, shit," I murmured aloud. "Oh, holy shit."

I dropped the antelope carcass (*Aepyceros whazzus*) and unholstered my Colt (*Equus fatalis*). Unbalanced by the sudden removal of so much dead weight, however, I fumbled the pistol to the ground, where it fired a muffled shot into the dust and kicked over onto its side. The noise halted the hyenas in their tracks, but only briefly. As soon as I had retrieved the .45 and pointed it shakily in their direction, they were already advancing again, contracting from a file of animals into an ugly, loping wedge. Only six bullets remained in my eight-clip, and although Roy Rogers or Hop-along Cassidy might have found that number sufficient, it would fall about ten shy of what I needed to survive this onslaught. I sighted along the pistol's muzzle, pulled the trigger, and—

Click.

I had not slid a fresh clip into the butt of the .45 that morning. Further, under prevailing circumstances, I was going to have a hard time extracting the old clip and feeding in a substitute. A single bandolier crossed my torso, and I hurried to squeeze seven or eight cartridges out of its canvas loops into my hands. I was shaking so badly that a couple of these fell into the grass at my feet. Looking up, I saw the lead hyena. Its mouth was as big as one of the Carlsbad Caverns; its shallow panting breaths seemed to be coming in perfect synchrony with my heartbeats.

The hyena jumped. Scattering bullets everywhere, I struck the creature a desperate blow to the head with the butt of my pistol. A froth of saliva showered up into my vision, and I fell backward over the little buck I had killed. The hyena rolled away from me unconscious.

Dazedly, I struggled to my feet again. A second and a third hyena, intimidated, went around me—but their remaining comrades had just crested a gentle swelling in the plain, and it did not seem likely that, in light of their overwhelming numerical advantage, they would all prove such cowards. I dug into my pocket for the Swiss Army knife, not even daring to think what good it might do.

*If I should die before I wake,  
I pray Ngai my soul to  
take. . . .*



Whereupon, so help me, the cavalry arrived.

Leaping, ululating, brandishing their clubs, the Minids scurried into my field of vision from the east. Alfie and Helen were in the vanguard of this unexpected counterattack.

All the Minids—Jomo, Ham, Genly, Malcolm, Roosevelt, and Helen—performed admirably, swinging their clubs so spiritedly that the hyenas, for all their size, were beset, bashed, brained, and bested. Moreover, throughout this abbreviated combat my rescuers kept up a demoralizing stream of hoots, yodels, and yawps.

Those hyenas that could, tucked tail and ran. Four or five others crawled away with crushed skulls. I, altogether overcome, crumpled to the ground, a collapse that could have spelled an end to White Sphinx—except that the Minids, when they came forward to finish off the hyena that I had knocked unconscious, treated me not as an odious interloper but as a fellow habiline.

A fellow habiline in rather indifferent standing, perhaps—but undeniably a comrade and band member.

Hunkering nearby, Jomo and Malcolm banged the dead hyena's massive head against the ground, fingered its nostrils and eyelids, and mumbled in their scraggly beards. Genly, squatting beside the antelope,

was deeply curious about the bullet hole behind the buck's right ear. While Roosevelt kept popping up from his crouch to survey the savannah, Ham, Alfie, and Helen lackadaisically cut away strips of meat from the open belly of my kill. I had never, without a pistol in hand, been this close to the Minids as a group before, and I wondered that they did not take more interest in me. Only Helen occasionally made eye contact, and I could not tell if she were finding fault with my appearance or trying to index me in her mental catalogue file of bipedal neighbors. Somehow, as she had known all along, I was not quite right. I was, and I was not, one of their own.

I gave her a smile—that ancient, self-serving primate signal of one's own inoffensiveness—and lay back on the ground. I had accomplished my design. All it had required was weeks of effort, a drought, a foolhardy hunting expedition, and a posture of absolute helplessness in the face of an attack by giant hyenas.

Helen sidled near.

Into my hand she placed a dollop of antelope meat. I accepted this and looked into her eyes, which were red-rimmed and haggard—but beautiful for all that. Then I cast a glance at my slaughtered prey, the antelope, and a reminiscent queasiness flooded through me.

(Bambi.) Embarrassed, memory-choked, I averted my head and closed my eyes.

## CHAPTER SIX

Fatigued and shaken, I returned to Helensburgh with the habilines. The trip back included a detour through the acacia grove where I had made my headquarters. Here I picked up much of the gear—my rope, my jacket, my shaving bag, etc.—that I had not carried to Lake Kiboko with me. (Malcolm and Roosevelt were toting the uneaten portions of my kill.) I had explained the need for this side trip by improvising finger lingo, snatches of pidgen Phrygian (an ignorant king had once decided, you see, that Phrygian was the oldest human language), and a range of facial tics and tremors that would have done Mary Pickford proud. These ploys, in combination, had persuaded the Minids to follow me to the place where I had stowed my gear, for, to communicate with one another, they were themselves dependent on hand signals, vocalizations, and a subtle repertoire of eye movements. While gathering together my belongings, I was especially conscious of how much information they appeared to be able to transmit

through glances, blinks, and brow furrowings. They could "whisper" behind my back without having to face away from me.

Once in Helensburgh itself, I had to contend with the curiosity of the children and the mistrustfulness of their mothers. The male habilines had ceased to regard me as a threat, but the women did not want me touching their offspring, bribing them with sugar cubes, entertaining them with the narrow beam of my penlight. That the children—especially Malcolm and Miss Jane's little imp, the Gipper—*enjoyed* being terrified by this strange instrument, and came back again and again to have their minds teased and their pupils shrunken, did not soften this maternal hostility. I was not allowed to enter any of the four clumsy huts on the ledge, or to partake of the women's food stores, or to wander too near when Odetta took her toddler Pebbles up to the hilltop for walking lessons, which always occurred under the vigilant gaze of Fred, Roosevelt, or Malcolm.

In short, I was a second-class citizen. My sophisticated wardrobe aside, I was the Minids' resident nigger, only begrudgingly better than a baboon or an australopithecine. The role was not altogether unfamiliar.

If I fit into the Minid band at all, it was because of Helen. She

took a special interest in me, I think, because I simultaneously mirrored and magnified her own predicament vis-à-vis her specifics. Granted, she had once joined the hunters in attacking me, but her participation had probably resulted not so much from a fear or a mistrust of me as from her own innate allegiance to her people—even if her lot among them was decidedly peculiar. I had ceased to be a complete outsider to the habilines because their own outsider-in-residence had chosen to acknowledge my existence. We were two of a kind, Helen and I. Our similarities transcended even the gross and arbitrary dictates of taxonomy.

Helen's status among the Minids derived from two unusual conditions. The first was her size, which made her either equal or superior to her male counterparts in speed and strength. She could outrun even Alfie, and although he might have been able to overpower her physically—a dubious speculation at best—he tended to avoid situations pitting him head to head against Helen or any other habiline. He ruled by force of personality, the hint of intimidation. If Helen submitted unquestioningly to his preeminence, she may have done so because her speed and strength did not yet give her a psychological antidote to the social dictates of gender. A big, strong,

swift-footed, and cunning female was still a female.

The second circumstance determining Helen's status among the Minids was her barrenness. She had no child. She showed no signs of ever conceiving one. In fact, she stood outside the more or less formal pair-bonding relationships structuring the habiline band. Undoubtedly, she had had paramours among the males. Alfie had almost certainly plucked from her the fresh gardenia of her maidenhood, for his chieftaincy of the Minids gave him carnal access to almost every female who had attained menarche. Those exempt from his lust included Dilsey (probably his mother) and, among the younger women, both Miss Jane and Odetta (perhaps his sisters). But if Helen had coupled with Alfie or any of the other hunters, she had apparently never conceived. Her breasts were high and small, her loins lithe and undisfigured.

At present, whatever her sexual behavior in the past, she seemed to avoid engaging in amorous dalliance with the males. In view of her vigor and appetite in other areas of physical indulgence—running, killing, eating, excreting, climbing, and roughhousing with the Minid children—this scruple puzzled me. Had her barrenness, exiling her from the tender domestic concerns and the friendship of female habilines,

inflicted upon her an aversion to the woman's role in the sex act? Well, possibly. She ran with the males, and cocks of a feather may sometimes celebrate the joys of treading their jennies.

Together, Helen's size and barrenness permitted her to fashion, within a social structure predicated on cooperation, a lifestyle of surprising autonomy. It would be false to argue that she had the best of both worlds (male and female), for only Guinevere and Emily on the distaff side ever treated her with affection; whereas among the hunters she had achieved "equality" not as another competent comrade but as a potent secret weapon (the bipedal equivalent of a Remington 30.06) against the merciless enemy Hunger. Still, being childless, she came and went pretty much as she chose; and, although Roosevelt or Alfie might occasionally go on solitary hunts, Helen was the only Minid who regularly ventured well beyond the citadel for longer than an hour or two.

Once, in fact, Helen disappeared for an entire afternoon, and I worked myself into a lather imagining that she had fallen to predators. She returned a little before sunset carrying a baboon infant, still alive, which she cuddled and unintelligibly wooed for several hours. How Helen was able to cull the baby from its troop without sus-

taining a scratch or setting off a riotous chase over the grassland, I cannot guess—but somehow she had managed. For most of the evening, the other Minids—with the exception of the children—kept their distance. Finally, however, Alfie sauntered into the little creature's field of vision, frightening it so badly that it bit Helen. This incident ended Helen's brief tenure as madonna, for Alfie, after fussing for a moment over her wound, insisted that she relinquish her baby to Jomo. Jomo and Malcolm carried the infant baboon into the darkness, and that was the last any of the rest of us ever saw it. I derived some consolation from the fact that it did not come back to us in bloody sections.

Among the hunters Genly was Alfie's sole rival for undisputed leadership of the band. However, he was a rival who had apparently failed to achieve victory in some pivotal past confrontation. As a result, Genly bore a deep scar on one forearm (habiline teeth marks, if I were any judge) and carried himself with a kind of saintly diffidence. He had redirected his aggressive instincts into the hunt, during which he could sometimes behave so belligerently—battering a warthog to death, driving a troop of baboons out of an attractive foraging area, snapping the neck of a colobus monkey

with his teeth—that even Vince Lombardi would have quailed before such meanness. On these occasions, gentle Genly unloosed scads of repressed hostilities, bees out of a jostled hive, and Alfie would glance nervously sidelong, bemused by the intensity of his former rival's rage.

In Helensburgh, on the other hand, Genly was deferential, glad to be of use. He never pushed for his share of any kill toted among us by another, never withheld so much as a wishbone from the importunate little beggars clamoring for a bite of his guinea fowl. You could easily wonder how he stayed alive on so little food. In fact, the vertebrae of his spine looked like broken wingnuts, and his face was more haggard than his comrades', with a hint of sagittal crest running like an embossed central part in his frowzy hair. While watching the others eat or handing an antelope thighbone over to a youngster, he would sometimes rub a finger along this crest, as if absent-mindedly trying to press it flat. An endearing gesture. It made me think that he was trying to assist the hit-and-miss laborings of evolution.

The foremost indignity of Genly's life sprang from the control that Alfie exerted over his relationship with Emily, his bond-partner. Wolves and whippoorwills establish essen-

tially steadfast pair-bonds; so did the majority of habilines; but Alfie, unlike all the other Minid males, rotated among a series of pallet partners. His favorite, as I have mentioned, was Emily, Genly's "wife."

Emily was a lanky lady with atavistically prehensile toes and skin the deep blue color of ripe plums. Frequently she would forsake the bosom of her family to live in Alfie's windbreak mansion. She did this so often that her allegiance to Genly began to seem a function of Alfie's whim rather than of her own free will and devotion. She came each time Alfie summoned her and departed each time he dismissed her—so that I could hardly blame her if she no longer knew her own mind.

Not long after my arrival among the Minids, Genly turned to me for solace, the innocent solace arising naturally between people who must make do in the emotional hinterlands of pariahhood. Almost, he was a male Helen. Not quite, though, because when Emily returned to him, he melted back into the habiline status quo and became just another adult hunter—whereas Helen and I were never that smoothly folded into the aspic of Minid society. Often, then, Genly came to me seeking either comfort or diversion, and I tried to oblige him.

He wanted little enough, really. A chance to fondle or heft

certain of my twentieth-century artifacts was enough to transport him from his problems. I gave him, for instance, the penlight. He shone it into his eyes and ears, played its beam across the faces of the children as he had seen me do, poked it into snake holes and warthog burrows, and exhausted its batteries within a mere three days. I took the penlight back and gave him my magnifying glass. He accepted this new plaything, lifted it to his eye, and, after "reading" a few pages of the tiny book I had also handed him, returned both items and stared meaningfully at my pistol.

Startled, I shook my head. "Cain and Abel are still a few centuries up the line, Genly. Murdering Alfie isn't going to solve your personal problems." (In retrospect, however, I wonder. . . .)

Genly put his hand on the butt of the automatic, forcing me to twist aside from him and spread my fingers across his chest as a friendly caution. Disturbingly, he did not take his eyes from the weapon.

"Veddy dangerous," I told him. "Pull trigger. Go boom. You recall this effect, no?"

My pre-Phrygian patois did not impress Genly. He raised his eyes and leveled at me a long, disarming stare.

Well, not quite disarming, for I refused to yield the Colt and

finally distracted him by jockeying a new set of batteries into the penlight and directing its beam through the thatching of one of the nearby huts.

Alone among the *habilines*, however, Genly displayed no fear of the pistol. Even though I tried to keep it holstered and had not used it since shooting the copper-colored antelope at the lake, even Helen eyed it warily. Alfie, too, remembered what my .45 had done. I felt sure that his present *laissez-faire* attitude toward me owed a great deal to enlightened self-interest. He was far from stupid, and insofar as my weapon went, at least, the other *Minids* had adopted his policy of *Leave Well Enough Alone*. All, that is, but Genly.

I began to believe—naively, as it happened—that a new demonstration of the Colt's power would deepen the other *habilines'* awe of my weapon and convert even the persistent Genly to this respectful attitude. I decided to use the pistol the next time we went stalking on the plains. The fact that the males' last several hunts had been only middling successes, and that scavenging during this period had not been very profitable, either, gave me an additional excuse for unholstering the .45 again. Genly must learn to respect the Colt, and the *Minids*, me included, deserved the psychological boost of a kill larger

than hyrax, hare, or guinea hen. We had gone a long time without.

The day after my little talk with Genly (while Emily was still shacking up with Alfie), I shot a giant suid—a devastatingly ugly warthog—at almost the full extent of my pistol's effective range.

During the stalk the habilines closed in on this bygone beast by *looking* one another to the places where each hunter ought to be. Depending on eye contact and discreet head bobs, they made very little use of hand signals at all. Eventually, without its ever having seen them, they half encircled the animal in a copse of whistling thorns, convincing me that it would be unnecessary and maybe even counterproductive to break out my .45. Then, however, Fred and Roosevelt, who had been engaged since dawn in a kind of frisky one-upmanship, destroyed the element of surprise by bursting into the copse from the north and flushing the warthog into the open before their fellow hunters had completely closed their dragnet.

Therefore, when the suid, lifting its tail, attempted to vamoose, I planted my feet, took aim, and fired. The noise scattered a flock of migrating swallows from the whistling thorns and momentarily confounded the Minids, who dropped to the ground or darted to the cover of

the shrubbery. Although the fear of loud noises is supposedly innate, a carryover from the automatic fears of our reptilian forebears, Genly merely winced and crouched. A moment later he was at my side, his jittery attention focused not on the dead warthog across the savannah but on the smoking barrel of my gun.

"You're hopeless," I told him.

Was it possible that Genly had a hearing impairment? Other than his immunity to noise-induced panic, I had no real evidence for this theory—but life among the habilines would not have been impossible for a deaf person, merely exceedingly difficult. Sight, smell, and the more subtle tactile senses might have compensated for an auditory deficiency. In any case, Genly was not wholly deaf.

"Boom," I said, holstering the pistol and fastening the snap.

We got the pig home by means of a crude travois that I improvised from branches, my open bush jacket, and a couple of pieces of nylon rope. My marksmanship with the .45 and my ingenuity in assembling the travois—a feat of on-the-spot engineering that I had craftily premeditated—gave the Minids a great deal to think about. You could see their thinkers thinking, whirring toward better mouse traps and self-propelled family vehicles and maybe even unspoken unified field theories.

As Genly and I dragged my makeshift sledge and its savory burden back toward Helensburgh, I felt that Alfie and the others had finally concluded that I, Joshua Kampa, was . . . a Credit to All Hominidae. I basked in their (probably illusory) esteem and wished that Helen were there to witness my moment of self-justifying triumph. Helen, however, had remained with the womenfolk that morning, probably with the intention of going off later and plundering our populous paradise of tree mice.

Her absence did not badly cramp my enjoyment of the moment. Little aware of what was to come, I strutted and strained in harness.

That evening we partied. The warthog was dragged, shoved, boosted, and kneed up the slope of the hill to the flat, grassy summit above Helensburgh. In that spot all the Minids gathered to partake of the dead animal's flesh. Excitement ran through these creatures—indeed, through me, too—like surgings of electricity, the elemental élan vital. Our gamboling on that gentle rampart was spontaneous and joyful. The hunters made an initial show of nonchalance, but this gave way to undignified chases and hide-and-go-seek games with Mister Pibb, Jocelyn, Groucho, Bonzo, *et al.*, and only Helen seemed to be having any success resisting the general frolic.

Alfie had bequeathed to me the honor of butchering the suid for dinner; I did so with never an appeal to habiline flake tools, relying instead on my Swiss Army knife to slit, slice, and dismember. This hard work kept my inward ebullience on an outward simmer. Once I had finished cutting, Alfie indicated that I was to have the first substantial bite and the opportunity to parcel out allotments as I saw fit. At social gatherings like this one, habiline etiquette demanded that whoever had made the kill receive their proper due, even if the successful hunter were a youth, a female, an outlander, or, like me, an exotic freak of nature. Alfie was abiding by this tradition, this natural morality, and I played my part by distributing meat to all those brave enough to come and get some.

At first even Ham and Jomo hung back, afraid to approach me. After they had come forward to take generous servings from my hands, however, the children and some of the women clustered near, too. No one disputed my right to serve, or squabbled with me or any other partygoer about the size of our portions, or sought to secure seconds before everyone else had taken firsts. I nibbled as I worked, twilight giving the veldt beneath us the beautiful antique tinge of an old painting.

By this time, though, flies



—miniature fighter aircraft with hairy landing struts and faceted double cockpits for eyes—were buzzing about with annoying persistence, and the redness of the warthog's flesh had begun to alarm me. Against the entire thrust of my survival training with Babington, I suddenly feared contracting either a pest-borne viral disease or the worm-communicated agonies of trichinosis. Dizziness descending, I stopped nibbling, stopped dispensing cold cuts.

"Brothers," I cried. "Sisters," I added. "How would you like to top off this party with a taste sensation nonpareil?"

The Minids gaped at me. They seemed to regard my rare verbal outbursts as staunch Anglicans might view the babblings of a Pentecostal ecstatic. That is, as unseemly lapses. Ironically, their own bursts of amelodic song at sunrise or other unpredictable moments of emotional overload were inarticulate analogues of my recourse to speech. The Minids did not recognize this similarity, of course; and, at the time, neither did I.

"Brethren, sistren, gather round. For the first time in the history of the prehuman race, I offer you the chance of a lifetime. You ain't seen nothing like what I'm about to lay on you this evenin'. . . ."

And so on.

Unraveling this tawdry spiel, I got my nausea under control,

waved merrily at the circling flies, and spitted the remainder of our warthog on a stick. There was not a lot of fuel lying about the hillside, but I gathered what I could find—dry grass, twigs, some underbrush—and flicked a match into the pile. The flare-up so astonished the Minids that they gasped and fell back. The sinuous flicker of the fire imparted an iridescent oiliness to the dark eyes and skins of the habilines, who, recovering, crept forward again. Still talking, still spouting poppycock, I thrust the haunch of the suid into the flames and held it there until the popping of its skin and the out-rush of a delectable fragrance had overwhelmed our entire company.

"There," I said. "There's the first-time-ever smell of roast pig. Ain't it sweet, though? Ain't it sweet?"

The fire drove the Minids back, but the aroma enticed them closer; not one of them seemed to have a good idea which impulse to obey. For want of fuel, unfortunately, my fire was going out, and the sparks drifting up into the African twilight were like evanescent stars, forming and dying at the same time. I had driven off the pesky flies, but the meat was still red, empurpled by thickening blood and the advent of early-evening darkness. I had to keep the fire going if I wanted this pig to cook, and the only way to keep

the fire going was to add more fuel to the tiny conflagration at my feet.

"Here we go," I crooned. "Here we go now. Gonna barbecue up some ribs for every little Minid. . . ."

I began nudging the heart of my fire across the hilltop to the ledge of eroded boulders overlooking Helensburgh. I charred the toe of one of my chukkas doing this, but the habilines, fuddled, parted to give me passage, then closed again and followed me to the lip of the granite wall. Directly below me was one of the four habiline huts. Crying "Banzai!" I kicked the pitiful remains of my fire over the ledge and onto the topknot of dry grass roofing that shelter. The hut ignited almost at once, sending a shower of sparks back up the hillside and illuminating our citadel, no doubt, for miles across the outlying steppe.

Several of the Minids began singing, pouring out arias of praise or lamentation to the youthful night. Your heart would have leapt or broken to hear them, and mine, I think, did both. In my hands, though, was the stick on which I had spitted the remaining meat, and I lifted this load into the air with both hands, presenting it to Ngai, Who dwells on Mount Tharaka. The fitful singing of the habilines faded in my ears.

"Preheat to four hundred fifty degrees!" I shouted. "Then roast

until a tender cinnamon brown throughout and bubbling with natural juices! Serve with pineapple slices, parsley sprigs, and side dishes of fresh spinach salad!"

I hurled the warthog haunch into the burning hut, where it collapsed a section of thatching and disappeared into an angry roar of flames. The smell of the roasting meat was heavenly. The habilines left off lamenting the ruin of the hut to peer down into the conflagration. I half expected to see the soul of that poor suid ascending to the realm of spirits on blistered pig's feet. Helen, who had crowded forward, was suddenly at my elbow.

"You don't *have* to roast the rafters with the repast," I announced to all and sundry. "But it's a time-honored technique. Invented by a Chinese nitwit descended, I presume, from Peking man. Read all about it. Read all about it in . . . in 'A Dissertation on Roast Lamb' by one Charles Pigg—for of all the delicacies in the entire *mundus edibilis*, my friends, this one is the *princeps*. Hallelujah. Step right up, brethren, sistren; step right up for a succulent taste of heaven. . . ."

The fire did not spread to the other huts. Twenty or thirty minutes later, when the ashes were smoldering and a few acacia boughs crumbling into crimson coals, I worked my way

down the hillside to Helensburgh with Alfie, Helen, Genly, Emily, Mister Pibb, and several of the smaller children. With a stick I rolled the burst warthog haunch out of the ashes and onto a rock to cool. Later, I gave a taste to everyone who wanted one. The habilines all appeared to enjoy what they ate, but I have since begun to doubt if their taste buds were sufficiently developed to permit fine discriminations. A pity, if true. Why were our ancestors so late to harness the random lightning to the cooking of their foods? Perhaps because they had no incentive in their mouths. . . .

Following dinner the Minids wrestled, raced, and cut capers, the curmudgeons along with the kiddies. There was not much order to these postprandial festivities, only enthusiasm and a high level of tolerance for juvenile mischief, no matter how old the perpetrators. I had recovered from both my dizziness and my irrational fears of coming down sick. And although the bloated feeling that springs from overindulgence now plagued me, I bore it stoically. I did not care if I ever returned to the present. The moon, looking little or no different than it does today, spilled its ghostly lantern sheen across the vast savannah. The Minids and I were Children of Eve together, Sons and Daughters of the Dawn. With Genly and Roosevelt as

sentries, we lay down like siblings on the hilltop.

I was happy; supremely, unconditionally happy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*"But man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing natiivities and deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting ceremonies of bravery in the infamy of his nature."*

—Sir Thomas Browne

The night exploded. I ascended from my dream to find Genly stretched out on the hilltop not more than five or six feet away. My pistol was not in my holster but wrapped about two of the unfortunate habiline's fingers. I crawled to him in the dark—the moon had long since gone down—and discovered that although he had shot himself through the lungs, he was still conscious, still painfully breathing. His black eyes, tiny pools of ink in a cadaverous face, stared up at me with neither recrimination nor recognition. As I eased the .45 out of his limp hand, I made a clumsy attempt to read his pulse.

Curiosity killed this cat, I thought.

Another portion of me replied, Curiosity and your own goddamn stupidity, Kampa.

I could have cried. What re-

strained me was my terror of the Minids, who scrambled from their hovels or crept cautiously toward me from their resting places on the cold hillside. They encircled me and their dying comrade, but did not venture beyond an imaginary barrier about ten feet away. Helen and Emily were the only exceptions to this superstitious timidity. Without waiting to assess the others' reactions, they glided like wraiths to my side and knelt with me over Genly's prostrate form. Although I expected moans and teeth-gnashing from them, their behavior, despite their bewilderment, was exemplary, low-key and seemly—as if they understood that an unrestrained outpouring of grief or rage would further traumatize the dying male.

At last, when Emily put her lips to her husband's furrowed forehead, I did cry. The habelines apparently had no tears—not for emotions, anyway—and their dry-eyed faces ringing us about seemed a shadow-gallery of gargoyles and carved masks. I was a stranger here. Then the faithless lady lifted Genly's hand and with a kind of reminiscent tenderness held it between her thighs. Genly shifted his gaze, and a froth of blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

"Genly, Genly, I'm sorry—"

I do not remember *all* that went through my mind then or shortly afterwards, but my fore-

most thought was that Genly was suffering. I ought to put the .45 to his temple and pull the trigger.

Technologically disadvantaged, the Minids did not understand the mechanical operation of firearms. Few of them, however, doubted that my automatic was a potent death-dealer. Even Genly in his curiosity and presumption had understood that much; he had simply not counted on dealing that fatal card to himself. So when I raised the Colt to his head, the Minids grunted their disapproval even as they cowered away into the darkness.

Beside me, Emily put one lank, hairy arm around her husband's head, while Helen, angry, made insistent chittering noises and jostled my gun hand. I engaged the pistol's safety and backed away.

"He can't recover, Helen. There's no way Genly's ever going to be well again. You've got to let me *ease* him along, ladies. All I want to do is *ease* him along."

Helen ceased chittering and stared at me. Under the implications of that stare, I withered. Shot down by an Eolithic princess who popped the heads of tree mice between her fingers and performed most of her excretory functions in public. Even though I believed then, and still believe today, that Genly deserved the merciful blitz of a bul-

let to the brain, I withered. Emily and Helen were holding out for life when the choice was not between life and death, but between a quick death and a needlessly protracted one. Because they would not let me shoot Genly, he would have to modulate by painful degrees toward his inevitable dying. That process was not one I was going to be able to watch.

"Listen, Helen—"

When she jostled my hand again, I stood up, removed the clip from my pistol, scattered cartridges right and left, and held the weapon before me like a defanged cobra, a creature no less hateful for having been rendered harmless. The night was chilly, probably no more than fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit; and, half-naked to the stars, I was a candidate for either pneumonia or hypothermia. I wanted a good, warm, woolen blanket and a bottle of whiskey or ouzo. My tears were streaming, and I tried to staunch them with my forearms and the back of my wrist.

Goddamn rod, I thought. You've turned poor Genly into his own assassin. You've made me an accomplice. . . .

I stumbled away from the dying habiline and the two Minid women. The other members of the band, wearing expressions of imbecilic incomprehension, reeled back to let me by, and I began circling a small section of

the hilltop, winding my body about itself the way a discus-thrower does. At last I caught myself up and hurled my pistol out over the savannah toward Mount Tharaka. It spun away into the night like a stone from a catapult. I was rid of it. This knowledge frightened as well as relieved me. For the sake of a quixotic scruple I had set my entire life at risk. Did Genly, or anyone else, give a damn. . . ?

Back in Helensburgh I set myself a task of penance and atonement. I gathered saplings, dry grass, and stones with which to build a hut to replace the one I had destroyed by fire. In fact, I accumulated and laid by enough materials to construct a second hut for myself. My preparatory labor kept me toiling up and down the slopes of the hill until evening, when I began the actual work on the huts themselves.

Quickly and surely, I erected the wall and ceiling supports, then covered them over with a much thicker weave of dry grasses than the Minids usually employed. This enterprise, which surprised and fascinated the habilines, kept my mind off Genly's death—without, however, dispelling my nagging subliminal awareness of it—and I began to cherish the idea of retiring to the warm, dry interior of my hut for a long nap. I wanted privacy, but I did not

want to abandon Helensburgh in order to acquire it. By moonrise I had finished both structures, and I crept into mine like a creature intent on plunging itself into the oblivion of a hard, hibernal sleep.

I could not sleep. Genly had died because of my carelessness, and the anarchic gaiety of the previous evening arose in my memory to taunt me, by way of contrast. From blithe giddiness to black despair in less than twenty-four hours. The Stone Age, it seemed to me, had an adamant heart. Outside, the Minids were softly singing their loss, each dirge creating its own context of grief—eight or nine separate voices with nothing in common but an otherwise inexpressible melancholy. This phenomenon had no precedent in my experience of life among the protohumans, and I felt even more a disruptive force, an intruder.

A silhouette suddenly appeared in my low doorway. It was Helen, her flyaway hair a halo against the lingering crimson of the sunset. I had not seen her since that morning. She was no respecter of thresholds, and mine was probably too new to merit any special consideration as a threshold. What was mine was willy-nilly hers, apparently, and she seemed to have concluded that this new hut could easily accommodate both of us.

She squeezed inside, walked to me on all fours, and touched my forehead like a confessor bestowing absolution on a penitent.

Something cold and hard fell against my knee. I reached down, picked it up, and realized that it was my Colt automatic. Slyly canting her head, Helen leaned back and studied my face. Her eyes were smoky marbles in a bust of discolored lapis lazuli, and I regarded her at that moment as an angel of transcendent apehood, a woman well ahead of her time.

"You're liable to need that," she said.

Of course she had said nothing at all, but in my despair I half believed that she *had* spoken, and I felt with absolute certainty that all I needed to survive this out-of-sequence period of my life was Helen herself. To that end, reading my thoughts, she had come to me of her own accord.

I was as nervous as a seventeen-year-old virgin. My confusion had a simple source: I did not know what mode of approach and receptivity must prevail between us. This confusion, baldly stated, has certain humorous overtones that I did not fully appreciate at the time.

Pair-bonding, as I believe I have shown, was a common feature of the habiline lifestyle. Although the resident cock of the wadi, or alpha male, might with

impunity coerce somebody else's cutie into his clutches, he usually had a favorite among these rotating concubines. In Alfie's case, of course, that was Emily, and after Genly's death she became his permanent live-in.

Observing this, I decided that Alfie had had designs upon Emily from the beginning, but that his status among the Minids and his uneasy relationship with Genly had not permitted him to surrender to out-and-out monogamy. To have done so would have been to risk another serious run-in with his only real rival among the men, for Genly was not so cowed as he sometimes contrived to appear. Therefore, not only to reaffirm his preeminence in the band but also to minimize the chances of a savage knock-down-drag-out with Genly, Alfie had had to bestow his affections upon Guinevere and Nicole as well as Emily.

Inadvertently, then, I had helped provide Alfie with an escape from the prison of his own power. He no longer had to lord it over the wives of Jomo and Fred in order to underscore his chieftaincy, for Jomo was too old and Fred too young to represent genuine threats to his leadership. Variety being a much-sought-after spice, Alfie did not completely forego the company of other ladies while establishing a household with Emily, but his philandering took

on a decidedly illicit cast, occurring out of doors and catch-as-catch-can rather than by invitation in the sacrosanct confines of his hut. He was a changed and seemingly happier man.

So was I, albeit a confused one, too. Wherefore my confusion?

First, without deliberately engaging in voyeurism, I had seen plenty. The habilines were an uninhibited people. Their natural rhythms, if you will pardon a phrase with an unhappy history, had an immediate outlet in their personal relationships. Couples coupled when coupling called. Ordinarily, they sought privacy in which to answer this summons, but not always. Anyone with eyes would eventually learn that Minid males pressed their suits from behind and that, in order to facilitate disengagement should a dinother come dithering along or a porcupine prickling past, partners often remained upright. Although I, too, placed a premium on survival, these approaches were not my style.

Second, they were not invariably the Minids' style, either. Sometimes a couple disappeared into a strip of forest, where, in a half-hidden bower, they lay side by side on plaitings of savannah grass and rocked in each other's arms like children afraid of the dark. (I had once stepped on Malcolm and Miss Jane, so disposed.) Was this a

nocturne of love or merely a melody of mutual consolation? I did not know, but I had a hunch that among the Minids eyes now had more to say to them than did rump or pubic promontories. Granted, they still might find pleasure in the backward amorousness favored even today by Kalahari Bushmen, but their options seemed to be increasing, their tastes growing more catholic. Slowly, however; very slowly.

Third, despite all I had witnessed and surmised, I did not yet know if habiline women enjoyed a state of constant sexual receptivity or if they were the love slaves of an estrous cycle. Among chimpanzees the females develop cumbersome sexual swellings to signal their readiness to mate ("pink ladies," Jane Goodall once called the possessors of these fragrant passion flowers), but habiline women, naked under their long and scanty hair, were fortunate in never having to flaunt such gaudy carnal corsages.

I, meanwhile, was unfortunate in having no clue to Helen's designs, if any, on my person. I finally drew her to me. Although stronger than I, with hands capable of ripping apart the rib cage of a hippopotamus carcass, Helen did not resist. Her head nuzzled my armpit, and we lay back together on the grasses of my pallet. I think she was listening to my heartbeat,

which was bonging calypso rhythms in the constricted drum of my chest. She listened for a long time. The singing of the melancholy habilines ceased, and the sunset glow on the horizon beyond Helensburgh gave way to a lustrous eggplant color and a dot-to-dot patterning of stars. Soon Helen was asleep. My uncertainty about her intentions on *Hold*, I too finally slept.

At dawn I awoke to find Helen staring down at me with those bright, smoky eyes. All my previous doubts and apprehensions came surging back. What did she want of me? What did I want of her? How were we to bridge the chasms of anatomy, angst, and animality separating us? A grey light filtered into my hut through the gaps in its thatching, and it seemed to me that Helen and I were tree mice, primed for some rapacious giant's lightning grab.

"What?" I asked Helen. "What do we—?"

Helen lowered her eyes, meaningfully rather than demurely. Her gaze came to rest on my tattered bush shorts. If I could pass the physical, I would qualify in her estimation as a suitable husband. Since coming among the Minids—as, initially, with Babington at Lolitabu—I had been guarded about by biological functions; and, to date, Helen had had no assurance that I was not as neuter as a



Kewpie doll under my Fruit of the Looms. Although I cannot ordinarily do business under the eyes of strangers, Helen was no longer a stranger, and with trembling fingers I moved to allay her doubts.

First, though, I unknotted the red bandanna about my throat and showed it to Helen. She remembered it from our first meeting, when I had attempted to win her over with a bauble and she had spurned the offer by raising both her hackles and her club. This morning, though, the offer charmed her, and she allowed me to tie the bandanna around her neck as a betrothal gift. Indeed, it constituted her entire trousseau. The moment lengthened, and I will never forget the way she looked as we shared it.

Even with my shorts off, I was not entirely a Minid. My mind kept tracking back and forth, sorting data, printing unflattering labels on my natural appetites: *bestial, perverse, reprehensible, depraved*. My parents, bless their souls, would have been appalled by my yearnings, and an old country boy like our Wyoming landlord Pete Grier would have seen more poetry in a farm boy's hasty violation of an indifferent heifer than in my adult attraction to the willing Helen Habiline.

Helpless to prevent what was going to occur, I tried to make a concession to both Good Sense

and Conscience. In so doing, I confused Helen about the exact nature of my masculinity.

Naked and erect, I rolled aside from Helen, grabbed a foil-wrapped condom from my first-aid kit, and fumbled the ring of folded latex out of its packaging. Then I unrolled the condom's milky second skin over the instrument of our impending union and turned to face my bride. Helen was taken aback. So was I. My sincerity was suddenly suspect, even to myself. Despite the deep affection and healthy lust that the Minid woman had engendered in me, my recourse to a prophylactic declared that I had certain nagging doubts that annulled the purity of my passion. Was I afraid that I might impregnate Helen? No. All the available evidence suggested that she was barren. No, I was not thinking of Helen. The spectre of venereal disease, age-old scourge of the promiscuous and the incontinent, had struck from my subconscious and I had grabbed for my first-aid kit. Now, I was momentarily unmanned by the pettiness of my behavior. Helen looked at me wide-eyed. I was a melting Tootsie Roll in a casing of wrinkled liquid latex.

"You probably think I've got to perform lickety-damn-split-quick or I can't do anything at all," I told her, embarrassed.

Cautiously, Helen reached out and touched the ring of my con-

dom. She had undoubtedly seen the everted skins of snakes cast on the ground or caught in the forks of trees, but she had never known any of the males of her acquaintance to reverse the ecdysial process in this priapic particular. But her curiosity had overcome her fear, and she drew her finger around the ring. Flash-freezing my ardor and unwrinkling my second skin, I saluted, greatly startling her.

"Give me a minute, Helen—I'll take it off."

This was easier promised than performed. Electrolysis, I swear, plucks hair less painfully. But I managed.

Off, the prophylactic still fascinated Helen. She took it from my hands and lifted it over her head as if it were one of those repulsive delicacies favored by the French. She refrained, thank Ngai, from popping it into her mouth, and I took it back. Inspired by the notion that our get-together was a celebration as well as a solemn rite, I inflated the condom's pale skin to the size of a bowling ball and tied it off at the ring as my mother had once tied off party balloons. *Electronically Tested for Reliability* read a legend near the ring. Buoyant, my condom and I demonstrated the innate risibility of tumescence.

Helen's eyes grew wider. Her bottom lip dropped. Then she snapped her mouth shut and reached for the balloon. How-

ever, she must have scraped its taut skin with a fingernail, for the next thing I heard was an ear-splitting *P\*O\*P!* and Helen's involuntary cry of distress. I went down almost as fast as my condom.

Terrified, Helen rolled away to the wall, clutching her knees and biting her lovely deep-purple lip. Tossing aside the illegible postscript of my French letter, I hurried to apply to her forehead the frank of my consoling kiss. Before Helen could respond, Jomo and Alfie burst uninvited into the hut.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed.

Then I saw their faces. Jomo and Alfie were reacting to the report of the punctured condom, and their bleak expectation—another habiline shot dead—Helen's huddled form seemed all too neatly to fulfill. I struggled to pull the lady upright and myself together.

"It wasn't the pistol, brothers. We popped a balloon. Nothing to worry about. Only a balloon . . ."

Talking soothingly to Helen, I got her to a sitting position. Jomo and Alfie squatted in front of her, looking glances of silent inquiry into her eyes, and she replied by looking back at them the answers they seemed to want. The crisis was past. I had not shot Helen. She was alive and well.

The men, noticing my nakedness, scrutinized me skeptically.

If they persisted in their contemplation, I reflected, my plumbing would be on the fritz for a week. What I had neither intimidated nor impressed them. After looking at each other with the open-mouthed "play faces" common to young chimpanzees and the children of Kalahari Bushmen, they left the hut and apparently reported what they had seen to their compatriots outside. A moment later, the Minids were serenading the dawn sky with a hoarse, many-throated aubade.

I returned to Helen. We settled back to my pallet in each other's arms. As the strands of untutored habiline singing gradually unraveled into silence, my bride let me coax her round. I let her coax me round, too. Genly was dead, but we were alive, and the difference was crucial. With the echoes of twentieth-century disapproval dying in my mind, I embraced Helen, put my lips to her brow, and somehow succeeded in joining with her on an elemental level that only a few weeks ago would have struck even me as unthinkable.

Physiologically, I concluded, Helen enjoyed a state of continuous sexual receptivity. However, she also experienced ups and downs of appetite that probably stemmed from her menstrual cycle, for in this female particular she was almost

wholly human. We accommodated to each other's needs, and if Helen occasionally withheld herself for several days, these bouts of protracted abstinence eventually worked to purge me of passion—much in the way that a lengthy fast inevitably undermines hunger. Together again, rediscovering the pleasure of the act, we fed on each other like starving carrion birds. Nor did I ever again insult my lady by producing a condom and thereby reminding her of how close I had come to bursting the promise of our romance.

Through discreet observation I confirmed that Helen was different from most of the habiline womenfolk in the disposition of her sexual organs. Whereas Dilsey, Guinevere, Emily, and all the rest had labia set almost directly beneath their anuses, Helen's genital flower bloomed in a more forward location. This placement made it possible for us to consummate our mutual lusts face to face, the technique we preferred above all others. The other Minids, with some infrequent exceptions, as I have noted, usually mated after the fashion of mandrills and mangy australopithecines—but Helen was a human being in my sight, and our love was not bestial but sublime. I insist upon this point because there are so many people whose prejudices force them to deny what to me was self-evident from the moment of our first coupling.

In the intervals between each rush of passion, Helen and I carried on as friends and companions. Our sense of oneness seldom permitted us to leave the other's sight. I deloused her, and she fed me berries and tree mice. We scavenged, hunted, and foraged together. Side by side, we wandered the veldt and gallery forests. In Ngai's eyes, at least, we were surely husband and wife.

I did not empedestal Helen, though. She had faults that I am not ashamed or embarrassed to record. For one thing, she sometimes stank. Her hair would become matted with grease or coated with dust, and the lack of water in the area made it difficult to remedy these problems. Once, under the pretext of play, I enticed my bride into the last remaining wallow of a river-course not far from Helensburgh and there applied a piece of pumice stone to her back and belly. Afterwards, she smelled better, and behaved coquettishly, and gibbered at me her girlish gratitude. She did not like to be dirty.

A second fault here springs to mind. Helen could launch many one-sided prattlefests, but she could not really talk to me. Although she was hardly to be blamed for this failing, I had begun to miss the sterling inanities of human conversation. I would have given two years' pay and perquisites to hear from her

pretty lips a single "Hot enough for you?" or "Have a nice day." Instead I got tuneless scatsinging and a great deal of murmurous blather.

I decided that Helen must learn to speak. During my in-depth training for White Sphinx at Russell-Tharaka Air Force Base, Blair had introduced me to some of the current research on animal vocalization, and my understanding of this subject led me to conclude that Helen's Babelesque cries and whispers were limbic in origin. That is, they had very little to do with the neurology of human speech, which flows like a river of light from the neocortical headwaters of Broca's and Wernicke's regions. Researchers can prod a rhesus monkey to spill its entire reservoir of natural calls by flooding current into electrodes sunk like spigots in the limbic lobes. So primed, the monkeys babble indiscriminately.

By contrast, Helen's prating was uniform in its emotional content and uncoerced, but "primitive" in that it arose from brain tissues older than those from which human speech pours forth, limpid and sustaining. (When, of course, it is not turbid and constipating.) I wondered if Helen had the cerebral wherewithal to learn what I had resolved to teach her. And concluded that she must, not merely because endocasts of hominid brains have given proof

of their incipient Broca's areas but also because my habilines possessed a repertoire of sounds so far beyond that of beasts that even I could not satisfactorily ape it.

Human beings have had reasonable success teaching rudimentary American Sign Language to chimpanzees and gorillas. However, I did not know this system, and the gestural language of the Minids already contained subtleties and refinements too nice for my apprehension. Even so, they *best* "talked" among themselves using facial expressions and eye movements, the way wolves are said to reveal a full gamut of canine strategies and desires. Likewise the Minids. A squint or a blink could apprise another in the band of the whereabouts of nearby vegetables. A puckering of mouth or brow could provide a telling gloss on this communication. Both text and gloss, unfortunately, were in an alphabet almost opaque to me, and although I did come to understand a little of Helen's eye language, I made up my mind to teach her English. I started with pronouns. Pronouns befuddle and exasperate. As in an old Tarzan movie or Abbot and Costello routine, pronouns deny or misconstrue themselves as soon as the instructor thumps his chest or nods pupilwards. "I," I said, pointing at myself: "I, I, I." Although Helen could

say this word, she pronounced it like the preface to a bloodcurdling hunting cry. No matter. My heart leapt. Of course, when I tried to teach her the word's semantic value, to demonstrate that she had encompassed the concept she poked me repeatedly in the chest with her gnarled thumb, all the while murmuring, "Ai, Ai, Ai." It took me a day to undo the damage, a feat I managed only with superhuman patience and the artful deployment of my shaving mirror.

We named, enunciated, and made meaningful moues in my hand-held mirror. Helen, to her credit, did not lose interest. Because I had not shaved since moving into Helensburgh, she had never seen my mirror before. It was a circle of glass in an aluminum frame, and she immersed herself in its silver flat-teries as a swan immerses itself in water. Each word I shaped was a new excuse to go gliding on her own reflection. Sometimes, indeed, she got so far from our mutual purpose that I despaired of pulling her back. She liked the way she looked, and she had never mistaken her image in the glass for that of a two-dimensional stranger trapped inside the mirror's imprisoning frame.

Helen—as if I required further evidence of the fact—was *self-aware*. My mirror, a miracle, had simply given her a chance to walk on the waters of her self-

awareness. I tried to get her to say the word.

"*Mwah*," she responded. "*Mwah*."

Because she could not simultaneously hold the mirror and preen in its tiny window, she made me hold it for her. Repeating her disappointing approximation of "mirror," she loosened the bandanna I had tied about her neck and lifted it over her nose and lips. For a brief moment, then, she was an Islamic lady proclaiming the privilege and the pain of *purdah*. Then, hoisting it upwards, Helen transformed the bandanna into a blindfold, through whose misaligned threads she disingenuously peered at herself. Up and down the bandanna went, becoming in the process a mammy scarf, a pair of earmuffs, and even a masquerader's polka-dotted domino.

"Say 'bandanna,' " I urged my bride. " 'Ban-DAN-nuh.' "

"*Bwaduh*," Helen said.

At that moment, trying to keep her bobbing face in the glass, I imagined myself the progenitor of an Ur-Swahili dialect whose descendant tongues would one day be spoken in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zarakal. *Mwah* and *bwaduh*—along with *Ai*, *mai*, and *yooh*—were precious little upon which to base such a fantasy, I realize, but it seemed to me then that Helen and I were making

progress. Frustratingly slow progress, but progress nevertheless. I did not want to give up too soon.

According to my adoptive mother Jeannette, I had not spoken my first recognizable word until I was well past two. Helen was far older than two, of course, but she had been exposed to bits and pieces of a comprehensive linguistic system only intermittently since my arrival. Based on our auspicious beginning (five "words" in as many days), given ten or twelve years Helen might well acquire a real oratorical competence.

By the afternoon of our fifth day of language lessons Helen's five-word vocabulary seemed an historic accomplishment. I had not tried to teach her either my name or hers for fear she would ascribe to each an encompassing generic connotation, Joshua becoming "man" and Helen "woman." Too, I had begun to feel a trifle guilty about having bestowed upon her the name of Thomas Babington Mubia's favorite wife. Or maybe about the fact that for most Westerners this name apotheosizes a standard of feminine beauty having nothing to do with my lady's primeval negritude. Our earliest vocabularies corrupt, and what I had learned in the household of my family had of course influenced—i.e., *corrupted*—my vision of the world. As for my first name,

believing that Helen would be unable to pronounce it, I never spoke it aloud for her.

"*Mai mwah*," said Helen when we broke for late-afternoon communion with the other Minids on that fifth day. "*Mai mwah*."

She had the mirror—*her* mirror, she had just called it—and before I could retrieve it from her, she left our hut to clamber along a winding parapet of stone to the hilltop where the other Minids were gathered. The old man Jomo was sitting in the shade of the only tree atop the hill, a fig tree, while his consort Guinevere searched his back for lice.

Helen shoved the mirror under Jomo's nose. This act affected him as if she had peeled off his rubbery face and slapped him with it. He reared back, threw an arm around Guinevere, and stared at Helen aghast. I tried to grab the mirror away from Helen, but she murmured, "*Mai mwah*," and rebuffed me. Jomo, recovering, eased the mirror from Helen's hand and bemusedly ogled his own flat features. Guinevere peered over his shoulder.

Other Minids began to gather, adults and children alike. Now that he no longer feared it, Jomo was jealous of his new possession. He had trouble ignoring the press of curious onlookers, many of whom squatted behind or to one side of him and extended their hands palm-up-

ward in patient entreaty. I stood aside and watched. Everyone wanted a moment with the mirror. Possession being nine tenths of the law, no one moved to snatch the mirror from Jomo, but no one ceased begging, either. Even Alfie had squeezed into a forward position beneath the fig tree.

A slippery portion of himself in hand, Jomo devoured this delicacy while the others appealed to his better instincts for a taste of the same. How could he continue to refuse such a well-mannered plea? In fact, he could not. At last Jomo turned aside from Alfie and surrendered the mirror to his aged comrade Ham, who hunkered with his back to the tree trunk.

To demonstrate to himself the plastic amiability of the goon in the glass, Ham grabbed his nose, blinked his eyes, and tugged his earlobes. A dozen palms wobbled within a foot of his face, stoically demanding their turns, and finally Ham, like Jomo before him, gave in to community pressure. He passed the shaving mirror to Dilsey.

Despite his status as chieftain, Alfie was temporarily odd man out, for Dilsey handed the glass to Odetta, who relinquished it to her toddler manchild Zippy, who grew bored in a matter of seconds and let it slip into the clutches of the effervescent adolescent Mister Pibb, who yielded it to Roosevelt, who,

perhaps in remembrance of our previous exchange of gifts, passed the fragile compact to me. Alfie, by now, was looking on with a lugubriousness that almost corralled my sympathy. However, I tore my gaze away, cried, "Wait here—I'll be right back," and hurried down the hillside to my hut. A moment later I was back among the Minids with an aerosol bomb of Colgate lime-scented shaving cream.

The habilines watched awestricken as I meringued my face with the shaving cream and then mischievously flicked lather hither and yon to witness their reactions. Horrified to see the lower half of my face foaming away, Bonzo and Gipper covered their eyes while the other youngsters gaped like spectators at an automobile wreck. Malcolm and Ham nervously palpated their own cheeks and chins to assure themselves the phenomenon was not contagious. Gibbering or signing, the womenfolk huddled against their mates for warmth or consolation. Helen, however, withdrew a good twenty feet, squatted on her heels, and put her arms around her knees.

Alfie sidled near. He extended his palm, a plea for my attention. I lifted the can of shaving cream and squirted a ball of foam into Alfie's hand. He flinched but did not scuttle for safety.

*Sniff, sniff.*

The pungent scent of limes. This implied, even for a habiline, edibility. Seduced by the fragrance, Alfie tasted.

*Pfauh!*

He spat out the offending foam and wiped his hand on the ground. Then his palm came up again, and I willingly gave him the aerosol bomb.

Suspiciously delighted, Alfie located the trigger atop the can and spilled into being between his feet a shin-high marshmallow monument. His thumb came up, and he and the Minids contemplated the result. Everyone was impressed, even the architect. He carried the can to the fig tree and put an epaulet of foam on Emily's shoulder. When she fled from his ministrations, scolding him for so decorating her, Alfie turned on Daddy Ham and bearded the old man with a snowy dab. Guinevere knocked the can from Alfie's grasp and kicked it between his legs to Malcolm, who, fielding it as gracefully as Maury Wills sucking up a grounder on the second hop, underhanded it to Fred. Fred festooned Mister Pibb with a rope of foam and vaulted into the fig tree. Alfie, Roosevelt, and Mister Pibb pursued him aloft. While the remaining Minids hooted at these inept brachiators, I went to Helen, lifted her to her feet, and led her back down the hillside to our hut.

By this diversion I had saved my mirror.



Looking over my shoulder, I saw the branches of the fig tree dripping with boars of evocative whiteness, almost as if it had snowed in this arid equatorial region of prehistoric Zarakal. A moment later the Minids came charging into Helensburgh after us, releasing fluorocarbons into the Pleistocene atmosphere and plastering the cracks in our hut with shaving cream.

All that night the odor of decaying limes hung in the air, scenting our citadel, and in the morning the lumps of lather decorating our huts had taken on the honeycombed appearance of bleached and abandoned wasp nests. As for the can of shaving cream, I found it a day or two later in the branches of a small euphorbia bush at the bottom of the hill. Just as I had led Genly into accidental suicide, I had led his compatriots into the temptations of littering and aerosol warfare. *C'est la vie.*

Helen and I kept up our language lessons. The mirror, which earlier had enabled me to confirm the forward placement of her reproductive organs, continued to prove a valuable aid. Unfortunately, its principal value lay in maintaining Helen's interest, for she could not properly shape the words I tried to teach her, and her acquisition of an English vocabulary had stalled at ten or eleven words. *Love*, if

you do not count pronouns, was the only abstract term among this number, but whether she recognized its possibilities as a verb, too, I am not yet ready to declare. She could parrot a sentence I had taught her containing this word, however, and I have often consoled myself on melancholy nights by pretending that she knew exactly what she was saying.

The sentence?

Why, "I love you," of course. I do not record it as Helen actually pronounced it because such a transcription would give the sentence a comic cast. Although I am not totally without humor regarding my relationship with Helen, in this instance I do not like to provoke your laughter. All of us cherish certain memories, and Helen's distinctive phrasing of the words "I love you" is one of mine.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

One morning we awoke to find Alfie dismantling his hut, scattering the supports and thatching to the wind. Ham and Jomo, witnessing this activity, attempted to follow suit, but Alfie prevented them. Although he was jealous of his own hut, he apparently wanted to leave a few dwellings intact as decoys. These would give both preda-

tors and other house-hunting hominids pause, suggesting to foe and friend alike that the original builders might soon be back to occupy their dwellings. By this stratagem, Alfie seemed to imply, we would get a jump on at least some of our competitors.

It was time to follow the example of the tree mice, the zèbras, the gazelles, the wildebeest, and all of Ngai's other children. No rain had fallen here in at least four or five months, and only mongooses, hyraxes, naked mole rats, lizards, grasshoppers, and snakes were going to find this area of the veldt hospitable to their lifestyles. We had best bid Helensburgh adieu.

We set out. I had not thought of returning to Lake Kiboko for weeks, but I *had* seriously considered going the whole hominid and shedding my remaining clothes. However, my bush shorts and chukkas still seemed indispensable. The pockets of the former accommodated many useful items and my scuffed boots had been on my feet so long that I had lost the callouses acquired during my survival training. Along with my shorts and shoes, I wore my .45 in its unornamented holster. My bush jacket was stretched taut across a makeshift travois, upon which I dragged my backpack, my bandolier, and a crude antelope-skin kaross of melons, tubers, nuts, and berries that Helen and

I had gathered over the last several days. But because I did not want to renounce my entire past in order to achieve the disadvantaged innocence of our Pleistocene ancestors, I kept my pants on.

A carefully considered, but ultimately rash, decision.

We moved in good order, the men encircling the women and children. Despite her recent pair-bonding with me, Helen continued to play a masculine role. Like Alfie, Jomo, and Fred, she brandished a hefty acacia stave. Malcolm, Roosevelt, and Ham carried lovingly polished antelope bones for clubs, while I, relying on my pistol and the others' martial skills, pulled my travois as if I were a member of the women's itinerant sorority.

Once, far out on the savannah, I turned and looked back at Helensburgh. Despite the distance I saw a number of two-legged beings swarming over the hillside and along the battlement in front of our abandoned huts. I pointed out these figures to Helen. She cocked her head to one side and for a good half minute studied their activity. No one else seemed interested, and we moved on. At regular intervals, though, I would glance back at the hillside. Eventually the tiny apparitions scurrying about there came down into the grasslands and completely disappeared from view. I had the distinct, unsettling feeling that the creatures were following us.

## CHAPTER NINE

Helen was the one who finally made a clear sighting of the creatures that had been following us for the last two days, and she informed the rest of us by throwing back her head and emitting a single ear-splitting bark.

To the east, not more than two hundred yards away, I saw three small figures looking at us from the lip of a wedge-shaped kopje. They scrambled out of view as soon as Helen's cry reached them, but I no longer had any serious doubts about the identity of our pursuers.

A large band of gracile australopithecines—*A. africanus*—had been moving almost parallel to our own line of march, using the high patches of savannah grass and the oasislike islands of thorn trees and acacias as blinds. Since my arrival in the Pleistocene I had seen only a few representatives of this supposedly well-distributed hominid species, always at a great distance. Although I had seen members of the allegedly rarer *A. robustus* at closer range, circumstantial evidence suggested that both species were rapidly dying out.

Alfie and the other Minids wasted no pity on the australopithecines. Now that they understood how close our tag-

tails had drawn, they seemed to be considering the wisdom of a sally against them. A nervous alertness informed everyone's behavior; the men kept exchanging glances and making noisy feints in the direction of the gracies, who, after skeedad-dling to deeper cover, remained altogether out of sight for the next hour or so.

Helen came to me and peered into my eyes as if trying to communicate a profound or frustratingly complex notion. We had paused for a moment on the edge of an arroyo, and I stared down into the cracked streambed trying to arrange my intuitions into a sensible pattern. What did Helen want to convey? I had no idea. She, as if to prompt me to comprehension, patted one lean, hairy breast and made a mewling sound.

Again, shrugging my shoulders and opening my hands to demonstrate my bewilderment, I wished fervently that she could speak. Charades have never been my forte.

"Helen—Helen, I don't know what you want."

Helen retreated from me, leapt down into the streambed, and began following it northward, back the way we had come.

"Helen, what are you doing?" I cried. "Where are you going?"

The other Minids seemed unperturbed. I jumped down into the gully and trotted after her, but she waved me back without

ceasing to retreat from us. When she clambered up the eastern bank, plunged into a thicket some thirty or forty yards farther on, and completely disappeared from my vision, my heart sank. I was astonished and hurt. Later, with more facts at my disposal, her departure made sense, but at the moment it struck me as arbitrary, erratic, and maybe even suicidal. The last glimpse I had had of her was a flash of vivid red from the bandanna about her neck, and that red had seemed frighteningly portentous.

Reluctantly, I followed the others.

Afternoon sloped into evening. What was going on? How had I offended Helen? By failing to understand her? By refusing to make bellicose gestures at the band of *A. africanus* shadowing us? Had Helen's disillusionment with me sent her off across the savannah in search of another husband? Pathetically egocentric, these questions pinched at my forebrain and hung on like angry crayfish. Reason would not shake them loose. I began to wonder if I could survive without Helen.

Toward twilight we approached a water hole on whose opposite bank stood a female black rhino and her hairy calf. They snorted at the water, nuzzling it with vaguely prehensile lips. The evidence of their

hides—splotted, mud-caked, rubbery-looking—suggested that they had already enjoyed a good wallow and were now just fooling around, keeping other thirsty animals at bay by refusing to depart. Swarms of bot flies danced about their impervious bodies, looking for dry places to alight.

Ham led us down to the water hole to drink, and the rhinoceroses' piggy eyes strained after our outlines while their big, purse-shaped ears absentmindedly tracked our chatter. Much to my relief, they did not attempt to chase us off.

When the Minids and I had finished drinking, Malcolm took up watch in a tree.

The darkness had a tincture-of-iodine quality about it, and my anxiety over Helen's desertion had begun to take on an hysterical edge. Unable to sit still, I paced the western shore of the water hole.

More than likely, I dozed.

Later, rousing myself, I saw nothing, only thorn trees and desolation under a falling moon. A moment later a shadow emerged from a thicket to the northeast. At the sight of this figure my heart began *ker-chunking* like an engine block whose bolts have shaken loose.

It was Helen.

I repressed the urge to halloo, to scramble down to meet her. The Minids deserved to sleep, and my rushing to Helen would

inevitably rouse and perplex more than a few of them. My heart laboring noisily, I waited for her to pick her way across the intervening territory to our water hole. Ordinarily she was lightfooted and quick. What was taking her so long? Had she sustained some terrible injury?

No, she had not. Helen was carrying something, clutching it in front of her like an idol. It was a baby. I remembered the baboon infant that, some time ago, she had brought back from a foraging expedition. That infant had not long survived its abduction, and if this was another stolen child, as it certainly appeared to be, the inarguable result of Helen's frustrated maternal longings would be the poor creature's death. Sweet Jesus, I thought, not again.

As quietly as I could, I went down to Helen and met her at the far side of the water hole. She handed me her darling, which was not a baboon but an australopithecine baby—from the *africanus* troop that had shadowed us all the way from Hellsburgh. The baby came willingly into my arms, and my first thought was that she resembled a human child in furry long johns. Her feet were more or less bare, and her knees—as if she had worn holes in her pyjamas—were naked, calloused knots very like my own. She refused to look at me, glancing instead at Helen before star-

ing wistfully out into the darkness of the bush. She was slightly larger and slightly hairier than Fred and Nicole's A.P.B., probably more than a year old.

"At least you had the sense to steal one that's old enough to eat solid foods," I told Helen.

Helen took the australopithecine child out of my arms and set her on the ground between us. Then, embracing me, she patted my back with both hands, all the while gibbering a series of syllables that had little relation to any I had taught her. Their unintelligibility did not obscure their binding import. As surely as if we had conceived this child ourselves, Helen and I were the australopithecine's mother and father. It was our responsibility to see that she grew into a healthy adult.

"This is crazy," I protested. "Helen, she's not a habiline. She's a kidnapped southern ape. Even if we manage to shepherd her past adolescence, what kind of life do you suppose she'll have?"

Still patting my back, Helen mumbled a string of incoherent sweet nothings. With foolish-fond eyes she looked down at our daughter, who appeared to be lapsing into an autistic trance.

"Who's going to mate with her?" I continued. "She'll be lucky if the Minids tolerate her presence, much less accept her as one of their own. Nor are her own folks going to want to take

her back. She'll be despised by *habilis* and *africanus* alike, Helen, just as if she were a half-breed. Can't you see what folly this is, what potential disaster?"

Helen was having no part of my faintheartedness. She hunkered beside the tiny girl-child and tenderly groomed her head. Now I saw that on her raid against the australopithecines Helen had not totally escaped injury. Blood from a series of claw marks striated her inner arm. And yet she had stolen this child with no worse hurt than that, a feat of such competent derring-do that I could only shake my head. The look on Helen's face said that I should tend to the child while she took a few moments to see to her wounds. Awkwardly, I knelt beside the little hominid and went nit-picking through her scalp, a courtesy that her trance did not permit her to acknowledge.

On the other side of the water hole Emily awoke, sat up, and looked at us. After yawning sleepily, she rose and ambled around the pond to satisfy her curiosity. Were we real or only a midnight apparition? Squatting as Helen had, she touched the kidnap victim on the chin. Then, fascinated by the australopithecine's passivity, she pulled her finger back and stared. Helen and I scarcely dared to breathe—as if Emily's next decision would spell either life or death for the abducted child.

At last I said, "Her name is Mary." I looked at Helen. "Is that all right with you? Mary?"

"*Mai mwah*," Helen said. "My mirror," I thought, was a reasonable approximation of "Mary." Let it stand. Let it stand.

"Good. That's settled."

Satisfied that Emily intended Mary no harm, Helen left me in charge of the child and disappeared into the night again. When, ten or fifteen minutes later, she returned, she was carrying a good supply of *ol duvai*, wild sisal, with whose sticky balm she treated the claw marks on her arm. Emily helped her, smoothing Helen's sparse forearm hairs aside and squeezing the natural anodyne of the wild sisal into her cuts. Why such solicitude? I wondered. Maybe it was the late hour, the presence of the child whose head I was still desultorily searching for lice, or the all-pervasive quiet. Whatever the reason, I too was at peace, my misgivings about adopting the australopithecine routed by an army of fatuous hopes.

Alfie roused us from sleep by banging his stave repeatedly against the bole of a tree. It was almost dawn.

Any troop of self-respecting baboons would have breakfasted before departing, but Alfie, along with Ham and Jomo, moved us out into the veldt with

nothing in our stomachs but muddy water and the fluttery sensation that accompanies either doubt or encroaching illness.

Today Helen marched at the center of our procession, taking Mary with her. Now that she had a child she was indisputably entitled to give up her roles as outrider, sentry, and bodyguard in favor of those as veldtwife, mother, and ward. Dragging her acacia stave behind her like a broken rudder, she carried little Mary on her hip. A weapon in one hand, a baby in the other. If she was confused by the disparate allegiances embodied by these symbols, her heart—at least for now—was with the women. Nor did the women harass or cold-shoulder her for joining them.

Once the Minids had all become aware of her, Mary focused their occasional attention without provoking their hostility. I had expected angry faces, angry gestures, maybe even an assault. Instead, the habilines took turns examining the child, whom they seemed to delight in sniffing and gently poking. Helen allowed the Minids their inspections. If Mary were to survive, they must satisfy their curiosity about the kidnapped child and accept her as one of their own. Without once whimpering or struggling to get away, Mary clung to Helen with wide, terrified eyes, fatalistically enduring her ordeal.

During our march the child overcame some of her fear of the Minids, and on one occasion, when we stopped to rest, she toddled away to join Bonzo, Duchess, and Pebbles, who appeared to be experimentally tormenting a pair of coprid beetles. The children did not prevent Mary from taking up with them. In fact, they allowed her to participate in the dismemberment of one of the insects, and both Helen and I looked on dotingly. After that, Mary, for all intents and purposes, was a habiline.

By noon we were in more or less open country, full-fledged savannah, but the mountain—still—I decided, about fifteen miles away—sometimes appeared to retreat from our approach.

A brake on our progress, the children continued to tumble about like puppies and to lolligag over any bit of desiccated matter in the grass. Mary was one of them now, and Helen sometimes edged out of the center of our column as if to renounce motherhood for sentry duty. She hurried back to Mary, though, each time the child showed signs of fatigue or crankiness. Her dedication to our daughter made me pensive and a little resentful. I had liked Helen as a comrade as well as a lover.

Late that afternoon Ham separated from the group and ran gimpily ahead of us to a depres-

sion in the grass. He circled this small concavity (which, but for Ham's strange behavior, I would not have looked at twice), then halted and cautiously circled it in the other direction. He hooted for reinforcements. When the other habiline men arrived, me among them, he lurched forward and yanked a large wedge of sod from the hollowed-out place in the savannah.

A high, perilous hissing sound ensued. I supposed that Ham had uncovered a snake, maybe one of those egg snakes whose ceaselessly coiling bodies and cobra-like hoods make your blood turn to ice. But their behavior is all empty bluff, and Babington had taught me not to fear them.

What Ham had found, though, was not an egg snake or a bonafide cobra. Not at all. He had uncovered a litter of cheetah kittens. I counted four of them, elegant little felines with masks for faces and jewels for eyes. In their immature, silver-blue coats, they pressed against one another spitting out their fear and indignation. Their outrage was humorous. Mother was off hunting somewhere, but she would be back soon and we had better scam before she caught us poking around in their crib. Who did we think we were, anyway?

Even after several months in the Pleistocene I was surprised when I found out.

Roosevelt and Fred clubbed

three of the kittens to death, showering blood and grey matter all over the grass. The fourth kitten tried to run, but Alfie booted it in the butt and fell upon it with his knee, cracking its ribs and pinning it to the ground. He killed it by biting through its neck. When he next looked up at me, blood was running from his mouth and there was a tuft of beautiful, wintry fur caught in his beard.

I retreated with Mary to the edge of the Minid gathering. As if the child were a magic shield or an inflatable life-jacket, I clutched her to me for the comfort she afforded. Together, neither of us quite comprehending the other's dismay, we watched the eaters eat.

As soon as every gut had taken on a load of kittenloin, torpor descended. No one wanted to leave. Although we could have traveled several more miles that afternoon, the satiated habilines had decided to make camp where we were.

A more vulnerable spot would have been hard to find. There was not a tree or kopje within two or three hundred yards. Setting up housekeeping in that open place was a little like pitching a tent on an interstate highway. You were asking to be run over. But, gorged and insouciant, the Minids either did not recognize or blithely dismissed the possibility of peril. Fortu-



nately, we were able to while away the late afternoon without having to defend ourselves against roving predators.

The sun went down like a Day-Glo bob in the mouth of the Primal Perch. There, then gone.

The next day we straggled without incident across the grasslands to the gentle hills at the foot of Mount Tharaka. Helen, who obviously did not feel well, permitted me to tote Mary much of this distance and spent her time foraging vegetable foods for the australopithecine child.

Our arrival near the mountain was highlighted by the appearance on the scrub-covered ridge above us of three or four hunters from another habiline "nation." We had trespassed into their territory, and in a season of drought, when dispersal spells survival, our advent must have seemed a challenge to their dominion. Holding Mary and gazing up into the glitter of snow frosting Mount Tharaka's peak, I heard . . . well, I heard ancestral voices prophesying war.

Actually, Alfie, Jomo, and Ham were hallooing to the sentinels on the ridge, and the sentinels were hallooing back. These eerie how-d'ye-dos diddled the high dells of the mountain and loop-de-looped across the grasslands. They frightened Mary. She dug her toenails into my thighs and tried to climb me like a tree. She was strong, too,

strong and persistent; I virtually had to squeeze the wind from her lungs to dampen her hankering for a howdah perch on my head. At last Helen noticed our struggle and relieved me of the imp. In her adoptive mother's arms, even as the hooting on the ridge modulated from threat into invitation, Mary quieted.

As we labored slantwise up the incline, I realized that Mary was not the only naturalized Minid who dreaded the impending encounter. I was as out of place among the habilines as she, a bran flake in a box of Cheerios. What kind of reception could we expect from the strangers on the ridge? Their faces took on specific identities as we climbed, but I still found it hard to think they were people in the sense that the Minids were people. They were attired no differently (a hairy sort of nakedness being the uniform of the epoch), and their weapons had a familiar look (cudgel, bludgeon, stave, and femur), but they reminded me of Ya-hoos rather than human beings. This was a visceral prejudice that I would have to uproot or sublimate. It was, I told myself, unworthy of Joshua Kampa.

Ham and Jomo seemed to have had prior dealings with the hunchbacked honcho of this other band. (Attila Gorilla, I mentally dubbed him, for his habilines were Huns.) They presented their credentials, laying

their weapons at Attila's feet to demonstrate our peaceable aims and our willingness to beg the Huns' indulgence while passing through their stomping grounds. Alfie, hanging back with the womenfolk, clutched the burnished thighbone of a wildebeest like a gigantic swizzle stick. If our reception proved less than hospitable, he looked altogether capable of mixing our adversaries into a habiline cocktail. Fortunately, this did not prove necessary.

Although I could not decode the guttural gibberish in which negotiations proceeded, in a matter of moments our uneasy truce had become a friendship treaty. Following Attila's lead, our entire band scurried down the back side of the ridge into a briary dale. On Mount Tharaka's elevated skirts there were trees and stands of bamboo, while the snow on the overleaning peak sparkled like the slush in a frozen banana daiquiri. We threaded our way through the briar patch, debouched into a naked ravine, and climbed through the ravine toward the delicious ices of the summit. A quarter of the way up, we maneuvered clockwise along a forested shelf to the Huns' tiny mountain resort.

The habilines here regarded Mary and me with frank suspicion. I was the more disconcerting anomaly, a buffoon with boxy feet and blowzy briches.

They had never seen anything like me before. They had no words—indeed, no mental concepts—for many of my accoutrements. My shorts did not completely befuddle them, but only because some of the female Huns wore crude, animal-skin cloaks, a concession to the cooler temperatures at this altitude.

In spite of their antipathy toward me, these people left me alone. The Minids, after all, had me in tow, and I was several inches taller than Attila, their own acknowledged boss man.

Mary the Huns ogled with less self-consciousness. She was an idiot child who caricatured them simply by being who and what she was. They could not seem to decide if they wanted to cuddle or cudgel her, for which reason Helen was careful about accompanying Mary on all her little jaunts about the village, an odd assortment of lean-tos and huts. I was protective of Mary, too, and found myself holding her a great deal of the time.

We stayed with these habilines for six days, and I never did develop any affection for them. They interacted well enough with the Minids, I suppose, to the extent that Mister Pibb began laying the groundwork for a liaison with a dainty Hunnish ingénue—but I did not care for our hosts' tastes in animal flesh, which ran heavily to bushbabies, colobus, vervet, and blue monkeys.

At intervals throughout this week Helen was fiercely sick, victim to a recurring malady that I attributed to our sudden change in habitat and diet. By the end of our sixth day on the mountain these bouts of vomiting had so enfeebled her that she spent the night prostrate but wakeful under my care. After patting Mary to sleep, I fetched back moist compresses of moss from the trickle-out of a nearby stream and applied these to Helen's throat and forehead. Eventually I curled up beside her to sleep.

When I awoke, the highland forest was emphatically swaying. The impetus for this motion was not the wind. Instead, the flank of the mountain had begun to convulse beneath us in just the way that cowhide convulses to dislodge a persnickety fly. Both Helen and Mary were gone. I staggered outside. Through the swaying foliage I saw them on the bank of the spring from which I had filched my compresses. Helen was holding Mary, but a lurch of Mount Tharaka knocked her legs out from under her. The child tumbled from her arms to the ground.

"Helen!" I shouted. "Mary!"

Mine was just one more voice in a chorus of confused voices. A crew of Hunnish habilines were spread out through the woods above the spring, chasing the mountain for its bad

behavior and celebrating their own fearlessness. Their whoops and catcalls piped a puny counterpoint to Mount Tharaka's rumblings, but none of the Huns seemed to believe that their lives were at hazard. In fact, they grew angrier. The louder the mountain rumbled, the more vehement their protests. Like pinballs, the Huns caromed about among the trees caroling their courage and their outrage.

Mary leapt to her feet, and Helen hurried to catch her. Before she could, one of Attila's henchmen swept down on the australopithecine child with a club. One swing nearly severed Mary's head from her neck, and the next narrowly missed Helen. I wanted to scream, but could not get any sound out. Instead, my pistol jumped into my hand. With hate in my heart and a trembling grip I pointed it at Mary's murderer.

Whereupon Mount Tharaka shrugged again, tumbling all of us.

When, a minute or two after this convulsion, I again lifted my head, Helen was presenting her posterior to the Hun who had killed our daughter. He touched her gently on the rump, then walked past her into the leafmold where Mary's corpse lay. To each of the other habilines who arrived at the spring Helen also presented her buttocks. When none of them either accepted this invitation or kicked

her down the slope, she went groveling to the feet of the premier culprit. In the extremity of her terror and grief she was seeking reassurance from an unconscionable barbarian. The barbarian gave it. As his comrades-in-arms dismembered our daughter's headless corpse, he patted Helen on the shoulders, stroked her consolingly, and murmured Hunnish commiseration.

I fired my pistol in the air, one shot for each habiline. Although they had not scurried for the mountain's rumblings, they scurried for my gunshots. The quake, by now, had run its course, and the reports were as clean and hard as the sound of an icepick chipping ice. A few moments later Helen stumbled down the debris-cluttered slope into my arms. Much more tenderly than Mount Tharaka had just rocked all of us, I rocked her, rocked her and rocked her.

Later, as Helen lay glassy-eyed and immobile in our hut, I gathered up what was left of Mary and buried these remnants in the soft earth near the spring. Then I took a walk.

In the twilight, preserved in a bed of volcanic tuff high on the mountain's side, a cyclopean skull caught my eye. It was the skull of either a mastodon or a dinother, a rope-nosed beast that had ventured up the slopes of Mount Tharaka in

search of shoots and leaves, only to die before being able to rumba back down to bush country. What seemed to be an immense eye socket in the animal's skull was in fact its nasal cavity, but the early Greeks would later mistake such skulls for those of one-eyed giants and would stand in glorious awe of the visions conjured by their imaginations from this error. I, too, stood in awe of the skull.

*Polyphemus was a pachyderm.*

After prising the enormous skull from the tuff in which it was partially embedded, I let it steer me back down the mountain.

At Mary's grave I erected it as a headstone, a memorial to our daughter.

## CHAPTER TEN

Soon after Mary's murder we separated from the Huns and made an encampment for ourselves on the northeastern flank of Mount Tharaka, eight or nine miles from our former hosts, but at a considerably lower elevation. The mountain appeared to approve of our arrangements, for it refrained from bellyaching about them, and we could lie down at night without fearing that an outbreak of burps and belches would jolt us all awake. I may have been the only Minid

who worried at all about the stability of Mount Tharaka's gastrointestinal tract. These worries I suppressed by a very simple expedient: I shut down most conscious mental activity and drifted from one day to the next as if *dreaming* the successive episodes of my outward life.

I became, as in my spirit-traveling episodes before White Sphinx, a disembodied observer, a camera on a mobile boom—with the telling exception that among the Minids I retained my body as a camera housing. For the next several weeks, then, my life was a picturesque narrative without a protagonist, a runaway Ferrari from which the driver has leapt, not out of panic but from a ripening indifference to its destination. The wind still scoured my flesh, and the night might kindle my vision with the fagot tips of stars—but now I drank in these phenomena without consciously remarking them.

Helen eventually recovered from the bouts of nausea that had plagued her in the highland kingdom of the Huns. She continued to mourn our loss of Mary, however. Picking a fruit from a galol tree or digging a tuber out of the ground, she would suddenly pause and cast a pitiable glance on Zippy or A.P.B. To distract her, I would usually put one of my own grimy discoveries into her hand and gesture her on to the next

likely foraging site. When we separated from the others, such descents into funk were rare, for we automatically removed the stimulus to melancholy afforded by the children.

Our new camp—twig and brush hovels through which the wind played sonatinas—lay in a bamboo thicket near a spring not far from the savannah. Temperatures here sometimes dropped alarmingly, and Helen and I would lie entwined in each other's arms against the cold. My teeth made typewriter racket, and my body often quivered like a clapper-struck bell—but I did not suffer unduly. The running sore at the corner of my mouth, the insect bites damasking my flesh, the bruises and abrasions incising their steel-blue intaglios on my shins . . . none of these annoyances truly annoyed me. Helen and I held each other, and the nights ricocheted away around us like the fragments of primeval chaos. I had become a habiline. So far as I could tell this transformation did not mark a devolution but a detour. I was dreaming myself into being out of the forgotten materials of pre-consciousness, and Helen was my guide through the dark.

I dreamed that my chukkas were wearing out, and they were. I had already broken and replaced several shoelaces, but now the rubber soles were fissuring, the scuffed Maple Cuddy leather cracking open to reveal

the aromatic little piggies penned up inside. Babington would have been ashamed of me for not discarding my boots and going barefoot, but I patched them with bark, bound them with moistened strips of bamboo, and pretended that my repairs were successful. They were not. One day I tripped on a binding, tore out the side of my right chukka, and, in disgust, hurled both my beloved boots into the canebrake below me. Thenceforward, until my feet had developed a new set of callouses, I lurched about like a gimpy middle guard. Surprisingly, maybe because I was dreaming, the callouses were quick to form.

My shorts also went. First, the crotch seam split. Although I mended it with fish-hook needle and a remnant of fishing line (which, for want of an opportunity, I had never used in Lake Kiboko or anywhere else), the resewn seam promptly ripped out, too. In any event, thorn bushes, briars, and hard wear had opened numerous tiny windows in the fabric. My flanks were exposed, and I was fighting a doomed rearguard action against nakedness. Because a couple of my pockets had long since worn through, I had already transferred their contents

to my knapsack. It was no hardship to displace my remaining belongings to it as well, and to surrender my shorts to Helen for a kaross.

More and more frequently I left my .45 in its holster in our hut. I covered the weapon, my bandolier, and my backpack with dried grass and walked upon Africa's good earth as naked as any Minid. The minor surgery Babington had performed on my masculine member in Lolitabu distinguished me from the other males in our band, but it was hardly a conspicuous addition to my several points of departure from the anatomical standard. In fact, naked, I was finally in uniform. Giving up the security of the .45 and the bullet-laden bandolier was easier than giving up the security of my bush shorts. Dreaming, still dreaming, I had almost totally divested myself of my twentieth-century identity.

For the first time in my life (I can see, in retrospect) I *fit*. My dreaming consciousness did not invalidate my desire to belong to either the Minid community or the larger Pleistocene community encompassing it. None of Helen's people made any attempt to tell the dreamer from the dream. ■

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